

THE LIFE OF OSCAR WILDE

By ROBERT HARBOROUGH SHERARD

*With a Full Reprint of the famous Revolutionary
Article, "Jacta Alea Est," which was written
by Jane "Francesca" Elgee, who afterwards
became the mother of Oscar Wilde,
and an additional Chapter con-
taining the Prison-
Man in*

ILLUSTRATED WITH PORTRAITS, FAC-
SIMILE LETTERS, AND OTHER DOCUMENTS



T. WERNER LAURIE
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NOTE.—*A limited Edition de
Luxe is issued of this book.
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Publisher.*

TO
T. M.

WHO, IN THE EXTREME OF ADVERSITY,
PROVED HIMSELF THE TRUE FRIEND OF AN UNHAPPY MAN
THIS BOOK IS
DEDICATED

“The heroes of literary as well as civil history have been very often no less remarkable for what they have suffered than for what they have achieved; and volumes have been written only to enumerate the miseries of the learned, and relate their unhappy lives and untimely deaths.

“To these mournful narratives, I am about to add the life of . . . a man whose writings entitle him to an eminent rank in the classes of learning, and whose misfortunes claim a degree of compassion not always due to the unhappy, as they were often the consequences of the crimes of others rather than his own.”

DR SAMUEL JOHNSON.

Preface

THE extract from the introductory passage of Dr Johnson's "Life of Richard Savage" which appears on one of the fly-leaves of this book sets forth in a manner singularly appropriate the impression which is produced on every thinking head and feeling heart by a contemplation of the career of Oscar Wilde.

Who, that follows his ascension to that "eternity of fame," of which he speaks in "De Profundis," and watches his sudden and head-long fall, will not echo those further words of that great, good Dr Johnson, of whom it may be said that had his like been living, at the time of Wilde's catastrophe, the whole after-story of Wilde's life would assuredly have been a less pitiful one.

"That affluence and power, advantages extrinsic and adventitious, and therefore easily separable from those by whom they are possessed, should very often flatter the mind with expectations of felicity which they cannot give, raises no astonishment: but it seems rational to hope that intellectual greatness should produce better effects; that minds qualified for

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great attainments should first endeavour their own benefit ; and that they who are most able to teach others the way to happiness should, with most certainty, follow it themselves."

At the same time this must not be taken to convey that any close comparison can be instituted between Richard Savage and Oscar Wilde, either in point of capacity and performance, or of character, or indeed, except in respect of their vicissitudes, of career. It may, however, be of literary interest to observe one or two points of similitude in the characters of these two men.

One reads of Richard Savage as to his choice of friends :

" His time was spent in prison for the most part in study, or in receiving visits ; but sometimes he diverted himself with the conversation of criminals ; for it was not pleasing to him to be much without company ; and though he was very capable of a judicious choice, he was often contented with the first that offered."

It will be seen in the course of this book, that even in prison Oscar Wilde took pleasure in the society and conversation of criminals. " The smaller natures and the meaner minds " still appealed to him, and he underwent punishment rather than forego their whispered exchange of words.

And it will further be seen in the narrative

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of his prison life how truly, it might be written of him what Dr Johnson wrote of Savage :

“ . . . But here, as in every other scene of his life, he made use of such opportunities as occurred to him of benefiting those who were more miserable than himself, and was always ready to perform any office of humanity to his fellow-prisoners.” And, generally, of both it is equally true, that :

“ Whatever was his predominant inclination, neither hope nor fear hindered him from complying with it ; nor had opposition any other effect than to heighten his ardour, and irritate his vehemence.”

With equal appositeness can the moral which Dr Johnson draws from his narrative be applied to this story also :

“ This relation will not be wholly without its use, if those who languish under any part of his sufferings shall be enabled to fortify their patience by reflecting that they feel only those afflictions from which his abilities did not exempt him ; or those who, in confidence of superior capacities or attainments, disregarded the common maxims of life, shall be reminded that nothing will supply the want of prudence ; and that negligence and irregularity long continued will make knowledge useless, wit ridiculous, and genius contemptible.”

It is not, indeed, to point afresh this moral

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that the present book has been written. The age desiderates no such lessons, resents them rather. Life is to-day ordered by a reconciliation of inclination and interest with the requirements of the written and unwritten laws. He sets out on a futile task who seeks to teach conduct from example however striking, for our present individualism will brook no such guidance. The purpose of this book is another and a threefold one. It is to give an authoritative record of the career of a remarkable man, of remarkable gifts and achievements; it is to give an account of the author's books and other works to that large section of the world which ignores his writings, which, like ninety-nine out of every hundred Frenchmen, for instance, has heard of his attainer, but knows nothing of his distinction; it is further to remove the false impressions, the misstatements of fact, the lying rumours, which, although the grave in Bagneux churchyard closed upon him only one bare lustre since, have gathered round his name and story in a cloud of misrepresentation of astonishing magnitude. It is, indeed, this last purpose which may be allowed to plead the opportunity of the present publication. It is now not too late to establish fact, to refute falsehood and to present a story freed from the supercharges of error or of malice. These floating rumours have not yet had the time to come together, to coagulate, and to

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crystallise. Rumour can yet be unmasked as rumour, legend has not yet hardened into history, posthumous pasquinade has not yet dried on the tombstone.

It was one of the dead wit's sayings that of all the disciples of a man it is always Judas who writes his biography. In the present instance this paradox has less truth than ever. The writer was in no sense the disciple of Oscar Wilde; he was indeed as strongly antagonistic to most of his principles, ethical, artistic, and philosophical, as he was warmly disposed to him for his many endearing qualities and captivating graces. His qualifications arise from the facts that for the period of sixteen years preceding Oscar Wilde's death he was intimately acquainted with him, that his friendship with him—of which elsewhere a true record exists—was continuous, and uninterrupted save by that act of God which puts a period to all human companionships, that he was with him at times when all others had withdrawn, and that for the very reason that he was not in sympathy with any of the affectations which towards others Oscar Wilde used to assume, the man as he truly was, the man as God and Nature had made him, was perhaps better known to him than to most of his other associates. The method of treatment which was adopted in that earlier record, to which reference has been made above, being no longer

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imperative here, has been abandoned, with all the more alacrity on the part of the author that he has ever been in complete concordance with the general preference of objective to subjective treatment in the matter of biography. To-day, what three years ago was utterly impossible, he may yield to his own inclinations, because to-day it has become admissible that a biography of Oscar Wilde can be written and made public. The writer has no longer to seek how to arouse interest in his subject through the graduated emotions of curiosity, pity, amazement and sympathy. It is open to him to record facts, without having to palliate the offence of so recording them by an exposition of their incidence upon others. The upward climb, the attainment, the joys of conquest, the catastrophe, the precipitation, and the horrors of the abyss may now be depicted upon his canvas in plain fashion. The reader shall see them as they were ; he shall no longer be coaxed by a cunning elicitation of his sympathy for the teller of the story to listen to a tale against which prejudice, the voice of public opinion, and his own conception of what it is seemly and expedient for him to hear are ever prompting him to close his ears.

ROBERT HARBOROUGH SHERARD.

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CHAPTER I

The Necessity of carefully tracing Oscar Wilde's Descent—The Real Date of his Birth—Probable Cause of the Error—His Admission to Mr Carson—His Distinguished Kinships—His Early Tastes—Early Successes—Alcohol as a Preserver of Life—Possible Consequences of a Dangerous Delusion—William Wilde's Skill as a Surgeon—"The Man whose Throat he Cut"—Another Famous Operation—The Voyage of *The Crusader*—A Successful First Book—His First Professional Earnings—What he did with them—He Found a Hospital—His Noble Charity—The Royal Victoria Eye and Ear Hospital—Honours and Knighthood—As a Land-Owner—His Literary Labours—Tributes to his Surgical Skill—"The Father of Modern Otology"—A Wife's Recognition—Other Traits of his Character.

WHEN Nature has bountifully endowed a man with every gracious gift which should ensure for him success and felicity in life; when she has made him the fit subject for the boundless admiration or the unrestrained envy of his contemporaries, and when this favoured and fortunate man suddenly discloses leanings, propensities, instincts, which, rapidly developing into passions he appears utterly powerless to bridle, precipitate him amidst the exuberant exultation of his

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enemies and the stone-eyed dismay of his friends into an abyss of disgrace and misery, it becomes more particularly the duty of an equitable biographer to inquire if either heredity, or parental example, or early training and environment can in any degree help the world to understand the formidable physiological problem, how in one and the same man can be allied, supreme intelligence with reckless imprudence, a remarkable respect for society with an utter defiance of social observances, and the most refined hedonism with a taste for the coarsest frequentations.

In the case of Oscar Wilde, the problem, when his descent and kinship have been studied, becomes even more intricate and perplexing. For while in his immediate parentage will be discovered people whose incontestable genius was united, as is so often the case, with pronounced moral degeneracy, his ascending lines, traced back to remote generations, display such solid qualities of sane normality and civic excellence, that this unhappy man's aberration must appear one of those malignant, morbid developments which alarm and confound the psychologist when they unexpectedly produce themselves in a man's mentality, no less than as by the sudden development in the body of

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malignant and morbid growths the practitioner is confounded and alarmed.

It therefore becomes necessary, before proceeding to the account of the strange vicissitudes of his life, to investigate with more than usual care, his descent and affinities. In this way alone can it be hoped that some light may be thrown upon the disquieting problem which his career discloses. It is an investigation, which, when the laws of atavism shall, with the progress of science, be better understood, may enable an enlightened posterity to judge a most remarkable man, in many ways an ornament to humanity, with the justice which was refused to him in his lifetime, and will continue to be refused to his memory as long as the mediæval obscurantism, from which we are only just beginning to emerge, still enswathes the minds of men.

So important is the object to be attained by this investigation—for what purpose can transcend the attainment of justice?—that if in its course personal considerations are ousted, and the pious reverence due to the dead may appear to be disregarded, these sacrifices cannot but be considered as imperatively imposed.

Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde was born at No. 1 Merrion Square, in the city of Dublin, on the 16th October 1854. So great a part

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of the task of telling the story of his life consists in correcting the mistakes of those who have written about him, in refuting unfair aspersions on his character, and in nailing venomous lies to the counter of public opinion, that particular attention may be called to the date of his birth. In such biographical notices of him as exist, the year in which this unhappy man was ushered into a world where he was to suffer so greatly is given as 1856. He was *not* born in 1856, but two years earlier. As this narrative proceeds negations of far greater importance will have to be put upon record. His life, indeed, like that of many men who have been made the victims of the unreasoning hatred of his countrymen, might be almost told in a series of denials of current lies concerning his character and his deeds.

As to the particular inaccuracy, however, to which attention is drawn above, it probably arose from his own misstatement. He professed an adoration for youth; his works contain many almost rhapsodical eulogies of physical and mental immaturity; and no doubt that as he himself drew nearer to what he satirised in his plays as "the usual age," he gave as the year of his birth a date which made him appear two years younger than he really was. A friend of his, on one occasion, endeavoured to point out

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to him that a man might derive far greater satisfaction in giving out his age as more advanced than it really was, in posturing as old in years while younger in fact, in hugging to his heart the secret reserve of days. But he refused to admit it.

In his cross-examination by Mr Carson during the trial of Lord Queensberry he was forced to admit the truth as to the date of his birth. The following remarks were then exchanged between the prosecutor and the Marquess's counsel :

"Mr Carson : ' You stated your age as thirty-nine. I think you are over forty ? '

"The Witness : ' I am thirty-nine or forty. You have my birth-certificate and that settles the matter.'

"Mr Carson : ' You were born in 1854—that makes you over forty ? '

"The Witness : ' Ah ! ' "

This " Ah ! " sounded like a sarcastic note of admiration for the barrister's skill in arithmetic. How it was calculated to wound the defending counsel will be indicated later.

For months before Oscar Wilde was born his mother had earnestly desired that the child should be a girl.¹ She often expressed her con-

¹ This fact, like every other fact recorded in this book, is given on unimpeachable authority.

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viction that a daughter was going to be born to her. She used to tell friends of the things she was going to do "after my little girl is born," and used to discuss the education she proposed to give to her daughter. When Oscar was born, her disappointment was great. She refused to admit that her new child was a boy. She used to treat him, to speak of him as a girl, and as long as it was possible to do so, she dressed him like one. To pathologists these facts will appear of importance.

Oscar Wilde was the second son and child, issue of the marriage between William Robert Wills Wilde, oculist and otologist (1815-1876), and of Jane Francesca Elgee, poetess and pamphleteer (1826-1896), which was celebrated in Dublin in 1851.

For his parents he ever felt the deepest affection and respect. For his mother in particular this affection reached the degree of veneration. In filial piety and love he gave a noble example to humanity.

The feelings which he entertained towards his mother and father are expressed in language of lofty eloquence in the book, "De Profundis," which he wrote while a prisoner in Reading Gaol, during the last six months of his confinement there. He has referred to his mother's death, and he adds :

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“No one knew how deeply I loved and honoured her. Her death was terrible to me ; but I, once a lord of language, have no words in which to express my anguish and my shame. She and my father had bequeathed me a name they had made noble and honoured, not merely in literature, art, archæology, and science, but in the public history of my own country, in its evolution as a nation. I had disgraced that name eternally. I had made it a low byword among low people. I had dragged it through the véry mire. I had given it to brutes that they might make it brutal, and to foes that they might turn it into a synonym for folly. What I suffered then, and still suffer, is not for pen to write, or paper to record. My wife, always kind and gentle to me, rather than that I should hear the news from indifferent lips, travelled, ill as she was, all the way from Genoa to England to break to me herself the tidings of so irreparable, ~~so~~ irredeemable, a loss.”

Mr. William Wilde (afterwards, Sir William Wilde), the surgeon, was a product of that intermixture of races in Ireland of which, speaking at a meeting of the British Association held in Belfast, he said : “ I think that there cannot be a better fusion of races than that of the Saxon with the Celt.” His grandfather, Ralph Wilde,

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was the son of a Durham business-man, and towards the middle of the eighteenth century was sent over to Ireland to seek his fortunes. The region which was selected for him for the exercise of his ability was that Connaught which Cromwell's soldiers described as the alternative to Hell¹. . . Here, after a while, he became land-agent to the Sandford family. . . He settled in Castlerea, in the county of Roscommon, where he married a Miss O'Flynn, the daughter of a very ancient Irish family which gave its name to a district in Roscommon, still known as O'Flynn's County. Ralph Wilde had several children. One of them, Ralph Wilde, who was a distinguished scholar, and who like his grand-nephew, Oscar Wilde, won the distinction of the Berkeley Gold Medal at Trinity College, Dublin, became a clergyman; another, Thomas Wilde, was a country physician. . . This Thomas Wilde married a Miss Fynn, who was related by descent to the eminent families of Surridge and Ouseley of Dunmore in the county of Galway. The Ouseleys were most distinguished people. Sir Ralph Ouseley, Bart., who was a very famous Oriental scholar, was British Ambassador to Persia. His brother, Sir William Ouseley, was

¹ "To Hell or Connaught" was the alternative proposed by the English invaders to the Irish peasants whom they hunted off their lands like wild beasts.

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secretary to Lord Wellesley in India. General Sir Ralph Ouseley won great distinction in the Peninsular War. His brother was a famous preacher and writer of theological works, of which the most famous is the book entitled "Old Christianity." Of this kinsman Oscar Wilde used to relate many anecdotes. He appeared to be much impressed by the sonority and suggestiveness of his name : Gideon Ouseley. On one occasion speaking of titles of novels he recommended to a friend to write a book of which the hero should bear the name of "Gideon Ouseley," and to use the hero's name as the title of the story. He declared that a book with such a title could not fail to appeal to the public.

Gideon Ouseley, Methodist, was the John Wesley of Ireland. His sermons in the Irish language, addressed to people at the fairs and markets, are still preserved in the memory of people living in the western province from hearsay from their parents.

William Robert Wills Wilde was the son of Dr Thomas Wilde by his marriage with Miss Fynn. He was born in Castlerea in 1815, and received his education at the Royal School, Banagher. It is, however, reported of him that "fishing occupied more of his attention than school studies, for which he had an admirable teacher

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in the person of Paddy Walsh, afterwards immortalised by the pupil in his Irish "Popular Superstitions."

In the *Dublin University Magazine* the following account is given of youthful tastes which led to studies of which in later life he was to make such excellent use.

"The delight of the fisher lad was to spend his time on the banks of the lakes and rivers within his reach, talk Irish with the people, and listen to the recital of the fairy legends and tales; his knowledge of which he so well turned to account in the 'Irish Popular Superstitions.' His taste for antiquarian research was early exhibited, and much fostered by his repeated examinations of the cahirs, forts, and caves of the early Irish which exist in the vicinity of Castlerea, as well as by visits to the plain of Ruthcragan, the site of the great palace and cemetery of the chieftains of the West. In the district around were castles, whose legends he learned, patterns, where he witnessed the strange mixture of pilgrimage, devotion, fun and frolic; cockfights for which Roscommon was then famous; and the various superstitions and ceremonies connected with the succession of the festivals of the season—all these made a deep impression on the romantic nature of young Wilde, and many of them have

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been handed down to posterity by his facile pen."

His professional studies commenced in 1832. As a medical student he acted as clinical clerk to Dr Evory Kennedy in the Lying-In-Hospital, and obtained the annual prize there against several English and Irish competitors. In studying for this examination he so overworked himself that his health broke down, and a fever setting in his life was for some time despaired of. He was actually suffering from the fever which went so nigh to kill him, on the very day of the examination. The case, indeed, was despaired of, until Dr Robert Greaves having been sent for, an hourly glass of strong ale was prescribed as the only remedy from which any results might be expected. It was held at the time that it was, indeed, the administration of this stimulant which saved his life. The idea was no doubt an erroneous one, according to modern medical science, and the delusion may very possibly have been the cause of much subsequent mischief in the young man's family. In a household the head of which attributes the saving of his life to the use of alcohol in copious doses the practice of temperance will naturally enough be looked for in vain; and it is no doubt at home that those habits of drinking were fostered which were to

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make such havoc in the lives of William Wilde's two sons. As to which it should be added here that although Oscar Wilde, was in no sense a hard drinker, and never by his most intimate friends was once seen in a state of intoxication, it is on record that every single foolish and mad act which he did in his life, acts which had for him the most disastrous consequences, was done under the influence of liquor. It is one of the most damnable qualities of alcohol that, where in a man any morbid tendency either, physical or moral exists, which, sober, he can keep under complete control, the use of strong drink will bring it to the surface. The French doctors say of alcohol that it gives the *coup de fouet* (the lash of the whip) to any disease either of the body or of the brain, which may be present in a sub-acute state in a man who indulges in strong drink. No doubt that, because in his home in Merrion Square, Oscar Wilde had always heard the virtues of alcohol celebrated as a drug which on a famous occasion had saved his father's life, he did not attach importance to the teachings of later and more advanced science, which would have taught him that in his case the poison might produce results the most disastrous.

William Wilde is still remembered as a surgeon of particular resource and courage. Even as a

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medical apprentice he displayed these qualities. It is related of him on reaching the parish church in Cong, in the County Mayo, one Sunday morning, he found the place in a state of huge commotion. It appeared that a small boy of about five years of age, having swallowed a piece of hard boiled potato, which had stuck in his throat, was in the act of choking. The young medical student, with the readiness which afterwards distinguished him amongst his contemporaries, saw at a glance that an immediate operation must be effected if the child's life was to be saved. He happened to have a pair of scissors in his pocket ; he was fortunately not restrained by the modern terror of using any instrument which had not been rendered antiseptic ; and he boldly cut into the boy's throat. The operation was entirely successful, and the child recovered. He may be living still, for when he was last heard of, in Philadelphia in 1875, he was a middle-aged man, who took a particular pride and pleasure in showing people a scar on his neck " where," as he used to say, " the famous Sir William Wilde of Dublin cut my throat." It was with similar readiness that Sir William once saved the sight of a Dublin fisherman, who was brought to him with a darning-needle embedded up to the head in his

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right eye. The snapping of a nail in which the needle was sticking had driven it in with terrible force. An ordinary operation was out of the question; there was not enough of the head protruding to allow of any hold being got on it with a forceps by which it might have drawn from its place. The man was suffering terrible agony. Sir William saw at once what was the only means of extracting the needle. He sent for a powerful electro-magnet, by the help of which in the shortest time the steel bar was extracted. There are on record many similar instances of his energy, courage and fertility of resource.

Already as a young man he distinguished himself in the field of letters. While still a medical student, he sailed in charge of a sick gentleman on board the yacht *Crusader*, visiting many places in the Mediterranean and in the East, during a cruise which lasted many months. The account of this cruise he published on his return to Ireland. He found in the Messrs Curry ready and liberal publishers. For the copyright of this young man's book they paid him a sum of £250. The speculation was a profitable one for them. The first edition consisted of 1250 copies of the book, which was issued in two volumes at 28s. This edition was

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sold out immediately ; a second edition¹ was as rapidly disposed of, and other editions followed. The book has long since been out of print.

The young man continued his medical studies in London, Berlin, and Vienna, and finally started in medical practice in July 1841^r, selecting as special branches, those of oculist and otologist. He took as the motto of his professional career, the words : " Whatever thou hast to do, do it with all thy might." His reputation was already so good, that in the first year of his practice he earned in professional fees the sum of £400, which it appears, is an amount very rarely reached by the fees of a surgeon in his first year.

This money he devoted in its entirety to the charitable purpose of founding a hospital where the poor could be treated for eye and ear diseases. At that time no such institution existed in the Irish capital. He did more than this. He applied the first thousand pounds of his professional earnings to his noble purpose. To him in this manner the city of Dublin and the whole country of Ireland owe the foundation of 'St Mark's Ophthalmic Hospital,'¹ which for sixty-four years has rendered such inestimable services to the suffering Irish poor, and which increases

¹ Since its amalgamation with the National Eye and Ear Infirmary, Molesworth Street, Dublin, this institution has become known as the Royal Victoria Eye and Ear Hospital.

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in usefulness every year of its existence. The last annual report gives a record of benevolent activity which few hospitals, which started with resources so meagre, can show. It is a noble institution, the foundation stone of which was the noble sacrifice of a noble man. The following extract from the first annual report, issued in 1844, gives an interesting account of its first establishment.

“ Although most of the large hospitals in this city and the several infirmaries, poorhouses, and other institutions in Ireland which afford indoor medical relief admit patients labouring under affections of the organs of sight and hearing there has not up to the present period existed in this country any special hospital for treating the diseases of the eye and ear.

“ The want of such an establishment, upon a scale so extensive as to afford general relief, has long been felt by the poor, and is generally acknowledged by the upper classes of society. . . . In the year 1841 a dispensary for treating the diseases of these organs was established in South Frederick Lane, and supported by its founder, Sir William Wilde for twelve months; at the end of which time, finding the number of applicants and the consequent expenditure far exceeding what was originally con-

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templated, or what could be supported by individual exertion, and not wishing to apply for public aid for the sum required to defray its expenses, he determined to try the experiment of making it support itself, by a monthly subscription from each of the patients. This plan succeeded fully, and since September 1842 the patients have each paid a small monthly sum during the period of their attendance, which has defrayed the expenses of the medicine. In this way, 1056 persons were treated during the year ending September 1843, and the total number of patients relieved with medicine, medical advice, or by operation, from the commencement of that institution to the 1st March 1844, was 2075. Paupers have, however, at all times received advice and medicine gratuitously. The sum paid by each patient is but sixpence per month, and this system of partial payments has been found to work exceedingly well. It has produced care, regularity and attention, and induced a spirit of independence among the lower orders of society worthy of countenance and support, while the annual sum of £50 received in this way is in itself a sufficient guarantee. . . that its benefits are appreciated by the poor, numbers of whom seek its advantages from distant parts of the country."

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Through a Mr Grimsshaw, a dentist, William Wilde obtained the use of a stable in Frederick Lane, which was to form the nucleus of the hospital, which afterwards developed into such a splendid institution. Having provided a few fixtures, the young surgeon commenced his gratuitous labours, which he continued throughout the whole of his career. An inscription in the front of the hospital records the name of its founder, and in the hall stands a bust of Sir William Wilde, which was purchased by direction of the head surgeon at the sale of the effects of William Wilde, his eldest son, after his death in Cheltenham Terrace, Chelsea.

In 1848 he published what has been described as "one of the most chivalrous literary efforts," his account of "The Closing Years of Dean Swift's Life."

Two years after his marriage with Miss Jane Francesca Elgee, that is to say in 1853, he was appointed Surgeon-Oculist-in-Ordinary to the Queen, which was the first appointment of the kind made in Ireland. In 1857 he visited Stockholm, and was created a Chevalier of the Kingdom of Sweden, and was, further, decorated with the Order of the Polar Star. Seven years later, at the conclusion of a chapter of the Knights of St Patrick, held for the installation of

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new members of this Order, and after the knights had left the hall, the genial Lord Carlisle, Viceroy, from his place on the throne addressed the great surgeon, beckoning to him to approach, and said : " Mr Wilde, I propose to confer on you the honour of knighthood, not so much in recognition of your high professional reputation, which is European, and has been recognised by many countries in Europe, but to mark my sense of the services you have rendered to Statistical Science, especially in connection with the Irish Census."

There was nothing of the cynic in Lord Carlisle, and his remarks to William Wilde were sincere as a compliment. One can imagine the mental reservations that say Lord Beaconsfield or Lord Lytton would have made had they been in Lord Carlisle's place and had they been called upon to announce the impending honour to the man who had distinguished himself by his labours on behalf of the Irish Census. For no document more than an Irish Census Report contains so scathing an indictment of Castle rule ; nothing that Speranza ever wrote constituted a more violent appeal to Irish Nationalists ; no Fenian denunciation of the Sassenach has ever exceeded in bitterness of reproach the simple total of numerals which William Wilde's labours com-

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pelled the British Government to lay before the people of Europe.

For the rest, the honour of knighthood appears to be distributed with greater largesse in Ireland than even in England or Scotland, and it really seems that it is in Dublin a distinction for a professional man not to have received the tap of the viceroy's sword. Wilde's acceptance of the honour was resented in some places, for it was thought that the husband of Speranza ought not to have taken favours from the Castle, just as some years later Speranza's acceptance of a pension from the British Government which she had so fiercely attacked in her youth, was also resented.

In a biographical notice of Sir William Wilde which was published in 1875, one year before his death, where reference is made to another honour which was won by him, the following passage occurs, which, read to-day, has a peculiarly pathetic interest.

“In connection with the award of the Cunningham medal of the Royal Irish Academy in 1873 to Sir William Wilde, it is a remarkable fact, worthy of record, that within a few months of its presentation, his two sons, William and Oscar, were each awarded a medal of Trinity College—the former (who has just been called

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to the Irish bar) by the College Philosophical Society for ethics and logic, and the latter (who is now (1875) a distinguished scholar at Oxford) for the best answering on the Greek drama."

- Sir William Wilde was too hospitable and too charitable a man to amass any large fortune such as would have been acquired by most men of his professional ability and European reputation, but at the time of his death he was in the comfortable position of a substantial landowner. "Some years ago," says a notice of him, "Sir William Wilde became a proprietor in the county of Mayo, where he has most successfully carried out schemes of improvement, and has shown that he can reclaim land and profitably carry on farming operations, which is what few of even resident proprietors can boast. Finding a portion of the ancestral estate of the O'Flyns (from whom he is maternally descended) for sale in the Land Estate Court, he became the purchaser. The portion in cultivation was covered by a wretched pauper tenantry, numbers of whom it became necessary to remove to enable those remaining to have a means of comfortable existence. Understanding somewhat of the language of the people, and being, as they said, "one of the ould stock," he was able with advice from the Catholic clergy to carry out



SIR WILLIAM WEDDERBURN.

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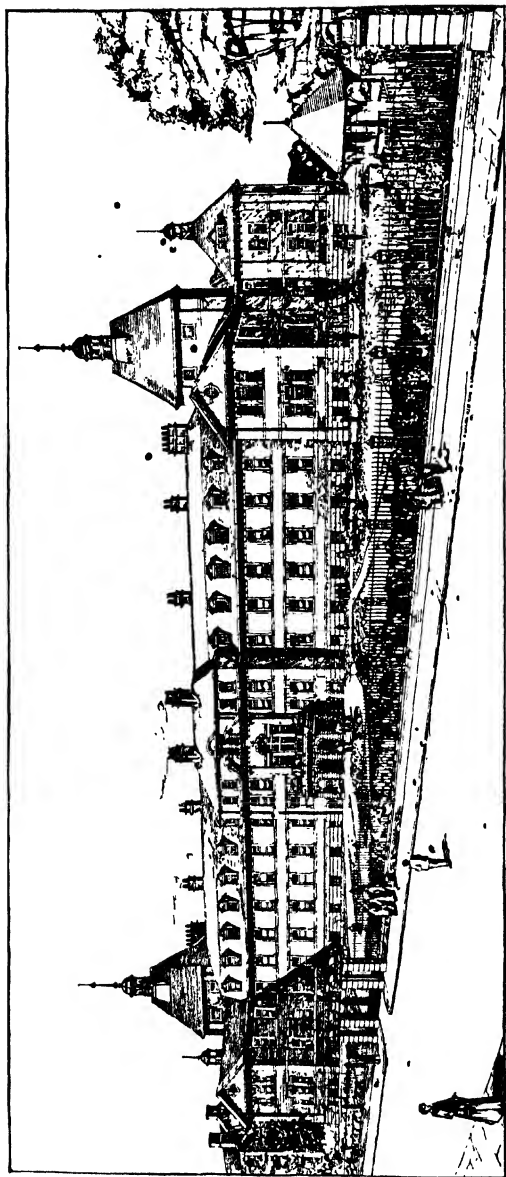
of science, and who, as knowledge progresses, reveal themselves to a mocking world to have been the veriest merry-andrews.

“Wilde's Arbeitsfeld war die Klinik,” (Wilde's field was the operating-room), says of him a great German writer on surgery. Elsewhere in German medical books of the highest authority, the Irish surgeon is referred to in the most eulogistic terms. Now praise from German scientific men, who for the most part seem to hold that light can come from nowhere in the world but a German university-town, and who have too often distinguished themselves by a manifestation of envy and a spirit of almost feminine *dénigrement*, is the sincerest praise that a British subject may ever hope to reap. One writer describes Wilde as, “ein Meister in genialer Schlussfolgerungen” (a master in deductions inspired by genius). Another German authority says of him: “auch in seinem lebhaften und praktischen Interesse fuer Taubstumme erinnert uns Wilde an Itard” (in his strong and practical interest in deaf mutes also, Wilde reminds us of Itard). Schwarze describes him as “the father of modern otology.” Indeed, it appears that as an otologist he was even greater than as an oculist. At a recent conference of medical men in Zuerich when the great pioneers

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of modern surgery were being discussed in a lecture, only three British surgeons were named, and these were Graves, Stokes, and Wilde. In Dublin medical circles he is still spoken of with the highest respect. Most contemporary doctors of his day would now be mentioned with the pitying smile with which modern physicians refer to all their predecessors whose studies were completed before the year 1889 swept away the clouds which had obscured the vision of the men who profess to heal. Mr J. B. Story, F.R.C.S.I., who was senior surgeon of the St Mark's Ophthalmic Hospital, and who since its transformation into the Royal Victoria Eye and Ear Hospital is continuing the work of Sir William Wilde at that splendid institution, is most eloquent in the praise of his predecessor's skill and science. He also holds that Sir William was greater as an aural surgeon than as an eye-doctor, but in both fields he considers him to have been one of the most distinguished surgeons that Great Britain has yet produced.

The same unanimity of praise is accorded to his literary work. Perhaps the most interesting reference to his qualities as a writer on the special subjects which he chose is contained in a passage which occurs in the preface which his wife, Lady Wilde, wrote to the life of Béranger,



ROYAL VICTORIA EYE AND EAR HOSPITAL TO-DAY. FOUNDED BY SIR W. WILDE.

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which her husband had left uncompleted at the time of his death, and which Lady Wilde finished. She begins by saying what diffidence she feels to take up the pen which her husband had let fall, so strongly does she feel her inferiority to him, and goes on to say :

“ There was probably no man of his generation more versed in our national literature, in all that concerned the land and the people, the arts, architecture, topography, statistics, and even the legends of the country ; but, above all, in his favourite department, the descriptive illustration of Ireland, past and present, in historic and prehistoric times, he has justly gained a wide reputation, as one of the most learned and accurate, and at the same time one of the most popular writers of the age on Irish subjects . . . in the misty cloudland of Irish antiquities he may especially be looked upon as a safe and steadfast guide.”

His charitableness and compassion for human suffering were such that although he was a pleasure-loving man he was ever ready, at a moment's notice, to leave the gayest and happiest social reunion to attend to the wants of some patient who might be in need of his gratuitous assistance. An anecdote in Fitzpatrick's " Life of Lever," communicated to the biographer by

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John Lever, the novelist's nephew, illustrates this benevolent trait in the great surgeon's character.

"On one occasion he (Lever) wanted Wilde to come and meet at dinner some friends he had assembled, and calling at Merrion Square was told that the doctor could not possibly appear. Being denied several times, my uncle at last put his handkerchief in bandage form over his merry, twinkling eyes; his expedient brought the oculist to the door in a moment; the *rencontre* ending in a hearty laugh at the success of the trick—which continued to afford much amusement at Templerogue."

Sir William Wilde died after a long illness on Wednesday, 19th April 1876, and was buried at Mount Jerome cemetery. His hearse was followed to the grave by a large and representative procession. The principal mourners were Mr W. Wilde, Mr Oscar Wilde, and the Rev. Mr Noble. All the Dublin papers published long obituary notices of the man, and the whole country deplored his loss.

How pleasant it would be if this man's memory could be left undisturbed as that of one who was great and good, if nothing needed to be said which may tarnish in some degree a reputation so nobly won. Alas! the exigencies of this

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biography exact, in justice to its immediate subject, a closer investigation into the moral composition of one, who, together with many sterling qualities, may have transmitted to his son certain leanings, instincts, passions, which shall help us to understand the dismaying problem of that son's conduct of his life.

It may be briefly then stated that together with a high reputation as a man of science and as a kind-hearted, genial and charitable man, Sir William Wilde had also the evil repute of being a man of strong, unbridled passions, in the gratification of which no sense of social or professional responsibility could restrain him. A characteristic anecdote of a stinging retort made to him by a veterinary surgeon whom he once met, while out riding in Phoenix Park, is still told, and public opinion ever held that the veterinary surgeon's critique was just and right. One of these patients, a Miss Travers, indeed brought an action against the Surgeon-Oculist-in-Ordinary, but the woman's sanity appeared doubtful, and the case was dismissed. His son Oscar used to relate of his mother as an instance of her noble serenity towards life how, when she was nursing his father on his dying bed, each morning there used to come into the sickroom the veiled and silent

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figure of a woman in deep mourning who sat and watched but never spoke, and at nightfall went away, to return on the following morning. It may be noted as a significant fact that the son seemed to see no aspersion on his father's reputation in this story. It appeared to him to be an apt illustration of his mother's nobility of character. Sir William Wilde left besides his legitimate children a number of natural offspring. One natural son of his was established by him as a surgeon-oculist in a practice in Lower Baggot Street, about two hundred yards from his wife's home. The man died some years ago, but is still remembered as the son of Sir William Wilde.

Another trait in his character which it may be worth while to note, because this characteristic was undoubtedly transmitted to one of his sons, namely to Oscar's brother, was his great neglect of himself. He was very shabby and careless about his appearance. He used to be spoken of as one of the untidiest men in Ireland. An anecdote is told of Father Healy which illustrates the reputation that Sir William had in this respect. At a dinner-party at which the Father was present, and which was held shortly after Sir William Wilde had been knighted, an Englishman who had just crossed from Holy-

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head was complaining of the sea-passage he had been through. "It was, I think," he said, "the dirtiest night I have ever seen." "Oh," said Father Healy, "then it must have been wild."

The portraits of Sir William which exist, showing him at different ages, reveal, as few physiognomies can do, an extraordinary mixture of intellectuality and animalism, of benevolence and humanity with bestial instinct. Mr Harry Furniss has included him in his gallery of "Ugly Men and Women." The qualification is hardly a just one. As to the upper part of his face, Sir William was remarkably handsome. No one with such a forehead and such eyes could be called ugly. But the lower part of his face and especially the almost simian mouth are very bad. In his son Oscar the same extraordinary contrast between the upper and lower parts of his face was to be observed. He had the forehead and eyes of a genius, or an angel. His mouth was ugly, almost abnormal, and such as to justify the accuracy if not the charitableness of his strong enemy, the Marquess of Queensberry, in an inhuman jest about his personal appearance, which he made just after the poor man's conviction.

CHAPTER II

Oscar Wilde's Mother—Her Gift for Languages—Oscar's Extreme Linguistic Facility—Lady Wilde's Scholarship—The Consolations of *Æschylus*—Her Serenity—Her *Schwaermerei*—Oscar's Dissimilarity in this Respect—The Preponderating Maternal Influence—Probable Physiological Consequences—The Elgee's Italian Descent—Archdeacon Elgee—"One of the Saints of the Wexford Calendar"—Lady Wilde *not* his Grand-daughter—An Incident of 1798—Dr Kingsbury—Lady Wilde's Distinguished Relations—The Rev. Charles Maturin—Balzac's Tribute to Maturin—How he stood Sponsor to Oscar—Clarence Mangan's Description of Maturin—Francesca Elgee's Nationalism—"Speranza" and "John Fenshaw Ellis"—Sir Charles Gavan Duffy, Revolutionary—The Villa Marguerite, Nice—His Journal *The Nation*—Number 304—"Jacta Alea Est"—Other Contents of Number 304.

THERE can be no doubt that from his mother, for whom he ever felt so great a love and so deep a reverence, Oscar Wilde inherited many of those admirable gifts and graces which so distinguished him amongst his contemporaries. Even as Lady Wilde, Oscar had an astonishing facility for learning languages. "My favourite study," she once related, "was languages; I succeeded in mastering two European languages before my eighteenth year." It is on record that Oscar Wilde was able to learn the difficult German

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language in an incredibly short time. We are informed in "The Story of the Unhappy Friendship," that "during the railway journeys which he took in England in connection with his lecturing tour in the winter of 1883-1884, carrying a small pocket-dictionary and a volume of Heine with him, one book in each pocket of his fur-timed overcoat, he taught himself German so thoroughly that afterwards the whole of German literature was open to him." Lady Wilde was a wonderful classical scholar; she had the sheer delight in Latin and Greek literature that true scholars manifest; and made of the Roman orators or the Greek tragedians her favourite reading. A lady once called at No. 1 Merrion Square and found Sir William's house in the possession of the bailiffs. "There were two strange men," this lady relates, "sitting in the hall, and I heard from the weeping servant that they were 'men in possession.' I felt so sorry for poor Lady Wilde and hurried upstairs to the drawing-room where I knew I should find her. Speranza was there indeed, but seemed not in the least troubled by the state of affairs in the house. I found her lying on the sofa reading the Prometheus Vincit of Æschylus, from which she began to declaim passages to me, with exalted enthusiasm. She would not let me slip

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in a word of condolence, but seemed very anxious that I should share her entire admiration for the beauties of the Greek tragedian which she was reciting." Of Oscar Wilde's scholarship nothing need be said here. His reputation in that respect is well-established. On what this reputation was based will appear hereafter.

Lady Wilde was a brilliant talker : ~~was~~ there ever in the world a more brilliant conversationalist than Oscar Wilde? Lady Wilde's serenity and tolerance reached a level to which none but great philosophers have attained. This tolerance and resignation she taught to her son, as some mothers teach their sons those imbecilities which in the aggregate are known as worldly wisdom. "My mother," writes Oscar Wilde, "who knew life as a whole, used often to quote to me Goethe's lines—written by Carlyle in a book he had given her years ago, and translated by him, I fancy, also :—".

" " Who never ate his bread in sorrow,
Who never spent the midnight hours •
Weeping and waiting for the morrow,—
He knows you not, ye heavenly powers.' "

" They were the lines which that noble Queen of Prussia, whom Napoleon treated with such coarse brutality, used to quote in her humiliation and exile ; they were the lines my mother often

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quoted in the troubles of her later life. I absolutely declined to accept or admit the enormous truth hidden in them. I could not understand it. I remember quite well how I used to tell her that I did not want to eat my bread in sorrow, or to pass any night weeping and watching for the dawn."

Yet the second verse, which seems to have been overlooked by Lady Wilde as well as by Queen Louisa, was one from which, had it been taught him also, the prisoner might have derived consolation. Goethe here formulates the law of predestination with the implacability of a Calvin or a Mahomet.

" Ih. fñhrt ins Leben ihn hinein
Und laesst den Armen schuldig werden
Dann uebergiebt Ihr ihn dem Pein
Denn jede Schuld raecht sich auf Erden."

It is always a dangerous thing to mutilate a thought.

A German word which well describes one trait of Speranza's character, and which is not easily translated into English, is *Schwaermerisch*. This adjective describes a state of gushing exaltation, a somewhat too ready enthusiasm, a capacity for discovering romance in what is trite and commonplace. The word conveys mild and tolerant censure, and generally suggests that the

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person to whom it is applied is too much taken up in daydreams to give much attention to orderliness and the other domestic virtues. One feels that but for Speranza's *Schwaermerei* there would have been no bailiffs ever to be found in the hall of the fine house in Merrion Square, and that the Surgeon-Oculist-in-Ordinary would not have been allowed to go out into the streets of Dublin in the neglected condition which inspired Father Healy's mordant jibe.

There was nothing of the *Schwaermer* in Oscar Wilde's composition. He had no penchant for enthusiasm, exaltation he never displayed; and though as a writer he enrolled himself under that *drapeau romantique des jeunes guerriers* of which Théophile Gautier speaks, as a man of the world he avoided romance. He was for precision, for the absolute, for rule and proof. He was at one and the same time a perfect grammarian and an excellent logician. And that, in spite of the restraint of his reason, he gave way to promptings so illogical as those that led to his catastrophe shows that at times, and under certain conditions, his reason failed him.

While he inherited from his mother many distinguished qualities, it may be deduced from his life that the preponderating maternal influence in his composition was responsible also for

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that abnormality of conduct which was the direct cause of his downfall. It is a matter of common observation among physiologists that where a child is born to a couple in which the woman has the much stronger nature and a great mental superiority over the father the chances are that that child will develop at certain critical periods in his career an extraordinary attraction towards persons of its own sex. This fact is one of Nature's mysteries. Those who believe in a Divine Creation of the world should reverently bow their heads before what they cannot understand and ought to take to be a divine dispensation. At any rate, the wisdom of Nature may be presumed greater than that of the Ecclesiastical Courts.

It is held in Ireland amongst people who knew the Elgee family that Lady's Wilde's assertion that her ancestors were of Italian origin, that the name Elgee is a corruption of the patronymic Alighieri which would have implied a descent from, or, at least, a kinship to, the immortal Dante, was but the outcome of a vivid and self-deceiving imagination. Her conversation afforded many instances of this habit of self-delusion. Things that she wished to be facts soon became invested in her mind with the solidity of such. Her day-dreams embodied themselves. For this

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her characteristic of *Schwaermerei* accounts also. Her sons never repeated the legend of any Florentine descent, though Willy, at least, was not averse to boast of his relationships. Oscar, on the other hand, apart from his occasional references to the cousin who had so sonorous a name, Gideon Ouseley, and to that other cousin, Wills, who combined with dramatic genius a mass of genial eccentricity, never spoke of his relations. He had an instinctive horror of anything approaching to self-aggrandisement, which he used to describe as the worst form of vulgarity. According to Lady Wilde, the Alighieri who first settled in Ireland and whose name was corrupted into Elgee was her great-grandfather. This man's son was the famous Archdeacon Elgee of Wexford. Here another negation is necessary. Lady Wilde was *not* the daughter of an Episcopalian clergyman; she was *not* the daughter of Archdeacon Elgee. Yet these misstatements are reproduced in the authoritative biographical notices which have been published about her. In a letter which she wrote on 10th August 1893 to Mr D. J. O'Donoghue of Dublin, the author of an admirable "Life of Mangan," she writes, referring to one of these biographical errors:—"In the sketch given of myself I regret that I was not named as *Grand-*

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daughter of Archdeacon Elgee of Wexford. The Archdeacon is one of the saints of the Wexford Calendar, and the people are always pleased to connect me with him. My father *was eldest son* of Archdeacon Elgee, and he was not a clergyman."

Jane Francesca Elgee was born in Wexford in 1826 of a Protestant and Conservative family. Her paternal grandfather, the Archdeacon referred to above, was a most distinguished man. He was a Rector of Wexford; and Lady Wilde used to tell an anecdote about him to illustrate his kindly character and the impulsive feelings of the Irish people. During the Revolution of 1798 a band of rebels had entered Wexford Church where the Archdeacon was celebrating the sacrament with a number of his parishioners. The clergyman was dragged from the altar, and was about to be put to death by the pikes of the infuriated Irish, when one of them, striking up the weapons which had already been turned upon his devoted breast, implored his comrades to spare a man who once had done an act of great kindness to his family. He related this act of charity—one of hundreds for which the Rector was famous—and spoke with such eloquence that not only did the rebels, who had been committing many acts of great cruelty in

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the district, spare his life, but they also resolved that none of his belongings should be touched, and a guard was placed at the rectory to protect the lives and the property of all its dwellers.

Her mother was a Miss 'Kingsbury who was, the grand-daughter of Dr Kingsbury, who in his day was president of the Irish College of Physicians, and the intimate friend of Dean Swift. His son, Dr Thomas Kingsbury, the father of Sarah Kingsbury, who was Lady Wilde's mother, was a Commissioner in 'Bankruptcy and the owner of the well-known mansion, Lisle House, in Dublin. Lady Wilde had many distinguished relations. One of her uncles was Sir Charles Ormsby, Bart., who was a member of the last Irish Parliament. She was first cousin to the Sir Robert M'Clure who was famous as an explorer, and who is best known as "the seeker of the N.-W. passage." Her only brother, Judge Elgee, was a distinguished member of the American bar. She was also a grand-niece of the famous writer, the Rev. Charles Maturin. Of this kinship Oscar Wilde was in his heart very proud. When he left prison it was from the hero of this Charles Maturin's most famous novel, "Melmoth the Wanderer," that he borrowed the name under which he was to drag out the remaining agony of his years. Possibly

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what most endeared to him the memory of this great-grand-uncle was that the mighty Balzac, for whom his admiration was unlimited, had expressed his high approval of the famous novel. In his "L'Elixir de longue Vie," Balzac gazettes Oscar Wilde's great-uncle with Molière, with Goethe and with Byron, as one of the greatest geniuses of Europe. He refers as follows to Melmoth and to its author, Maturin :—

"Il fût en effet le type du Don Juan de Molière, du Faust de Goethe, du Manfred de Byron et du Melmoth de Maturin. Grandes images tracées par les plus grandes génies de l'Europe." One needs to know the estimation which Oscar Wilde held of Balzac as an artist and a thinker to understand with what gratification these lines of highest tribute to his kinsman must have filled him.

But besides Balzac there was another great intellect which had confessed to the power which Maturin and his hero had exercised over him. In W. M. Thackeray's "Goethe in his Old Age" we find the following reference to them :—

"I felt quite afraid before them, and recollect comparing them to the eyes of the hero of a certain romance called "Melmoth the Wanderer," which used to alarm us boys thirty years ago ; eyes of an individual who had made

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a bargain with a certain person, and at an extreme old age retained "those eyes in all their awful splendour."

Charles Baudelaire, the poet, for whom Oscar Wilde's admiration was so intense, wrote thus of Melmoth :—

"Celébre voyageur Melmoth, la grande création satanique du révérend Maturin. Quoi de plus grand, quoi de plus puissant relativement à la pauvre humanité que ce pâle et ennuyé Melmoth ?"

In the house in Merrion Square was a fine bust of Charles Maturin. It is either a cast of one executed at the request of Sir Walter Scott, and formerly preserved at Abbotsford, or from a mask impression taken after his death. Though, of course, the portrait of an older man (than when Melmoth was written) years seemed to have told very little on his face if we compare it with the strikingly youthful countenance that appears in the *New Monthly Magazine*.

In this Charles Maturin we find that mixture of genius and insanity which manifested it also in the lad who was brought up in reverent contemplation of his bust, and in whole-hearted admiration of his life and work. Kinsmen by affinity no less than kinsmen by consanguinity can transmit their qualities and defects to their

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posterity ; and there can be no doubt whatever that Oscar Wilde's nature was greatly moulded by the strong influence that Maturin exercised over his mother. This being an indisputable fact it becomes necessary to seek some further information on the subject of this strange and brilliant man, who so many years after his death was to stand sponsor to the most unhappy of his kinsmen. The best account of Charles Maturin as a man is to be found in the pages of that excellent biography of "Clarence Mangan, the Irish Poet," by R. J. O'Donoghue, to which reference has been made above. Mr O'Donoghue prefaces Mangan's description of Maturin with some comments of his own, and the whole passage may be quoted here. Particular attention may be requested to the account of Maturin's eccentricities of dress. They may explain much in Oscar's peculiarities in the same respect. Oscar Wilde was accused because of them of a vulgar desire for *réclame*, for self-advertisement. To Charles Maturin a more lenient age accorded his foibles, just as to Balzac was granted his monkish cowl, to Van Dyck his court array, and to Barbey d'Aurevilly his cloak of red samite.

The following is Mangan's description with O'Donoghue's prefatory remarks :—

“ Towards the close of his life Mangan put on

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record his impressions of this remarkable writer, Maturin, in whom Scott and Byron so thoroughly believed that the first offered to edit his works after his death, and the latter used all his influence successfully to get a hearing for his plays. Numerous stories are related of him. His genius was of the untamed, uncultivated kind. His works are those of a madman, glowing with burning eloquence and deep feeling, but full of absurdities and inconsistencies. His Irish tales, such as 'The Wild Irish Boys,' and 'The Milesian Chief,' are made almost unreadable by a vicious and ranting style. Whenever Maturin was engaged in literary work he used to place a wafer on his forehead to let those who entered his study know that he was not to be disturbed. Mangan had more than the prevailing admiration for the grotesqueness of Maturin's romances; their terrible and awe-inspiring nature impressed him profoundly. He felt a kind of fascination for this lonely man of genius, whom at one period he might have called in his own words,

"The Only, the Lonely, the Earth's Companionless One?"

"He opens his sketch, which is very characteristic of his style, with the humorous rhyme:—

"Maturin, Maturin, what a strange hat you're in?"

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“ ‘ I saw Maturin but on three occasions, and on all these within two months of his death. I was then a mere boy ; and when I assure the reader that I was strongly imbued with a belief in those doctrines of my church which seem (and only seem) to savour of what is theologically called “ exclusiveness,” he will appreciate the force of the impulse which urged me one morning to follow the author of Melmoth into the porch of St Peter’s Church in Aungier Street, and hear him read the burial service. Maturin, however, did not read, he simply repeated ; but with a grandeur of emphasis, and an impressive power of manner that chained me to the spot. His eyes, while he spoke, continually wandered from side to side, and at length rested on me, who reddened up to the roots of my hair at being even noticed by a man that ranked far higher in my estimation than Napoleon Bonaparte. I observed that, after having concluded the service, he whispered something to the clerk at his side, and then again looked steadfastly at me. If I had been the master of sceptres—of worlds—I would have given them all that moment to have been put in possession of his remark.

“ ‘ The second time I saw Maturin he had been just officiating, as on the former occasion,

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at a funeral. He stalked along York Street with an abstracted, or rather distracted air, the white scarf and hat-band which he had received remaining still wreathed round his beautifully-shaped person, and exhibiting to the gaze of the amused and amazed pedestrians whom he almost literally encountered in his path, a boot upon one foot, and a shoe on the other. His long pale, melancholy, Don Quixote, out-of-the-world face would have inclined you to believe that Dante, Bajazet, and the Cid had risen together from their sepulchres and clubbed their features for the production of an effect. But Maturin's mind was only fractionally portrayed, so to speak, in his countenance. The great Irishman, like Hamlet, had that within him, which passed show, and escaped far and away beyond the possibility of expression by the clay lineament. He bore the "hunderscars" about him, but they were graven, not on his brow, but on his heart.

" ' The third and last time that I beheld this marvellous man I remember well.' " It was some time before his death, on a balmy Autumn evening, in 1824. He slowly descended the steps of his own house, which, perhaps, some future Transatlantic biographer may thank me for informing him was at No. 42 York Street,¹

¹ 41 is generally given as the number.

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and took his way in the direction of Whitefriar Street, into Castle Street, and past the Royal Exchange into Dame Street, every second person staring at him and the extraordinary double-belted and treble-caped rug of an old garment—neither coat nor cloak—which enveloped his person. But here it was that I, who had tracked the footsteps of the man as his shadow, discovered that the feeling to which some individuals, rather over sharp and shrewd, had been pleased to ascribe this “affectation of singularity” had no existence in Maturin. For, instead of passing along Dame Street, where he would have been “the observed of all observers,” he wended his way along the dark and forlorn locality of Dame Lane, and having reached the end of this not very classical thoroughfare, crossed over to Anglesea Street, where I lost sight of him. Perhaps he went into one of those bibliopolitan establishments wherewith that Paternoster Row of Dublin then abounded. I never saw him afterwards. . . . An inhabitant of one of the stars dropped upon our planet could hardly feel more bewildered than Maturin habitually felt in his consociation with the beings around him. He had no friend, companion, brother; he and the “Lonely Man of Shiraz” might have shaken hands and then—

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parted. He—in his own dark way—understood many people ; but nobody understood him in any way.’ ”

Till the age of eighteen Francesca Elgee devoted herself entirely to study and reading. “ Till my eighteenth year, I never wrote anything,” she relates, “ Then, one day, a volume of ‘ Ireland’s Library,’ issued from *The Nation* office by Mr Duffy, happened to come my way. I read it eagerly, and my patriotism was kindled.” This volume was D’Alton Williams’ book, “ The Spirit of the Nation.”

“ Till then,” says Lady Wilde, “ I was quite indifferent to the National movement, and if I thought about it at all, probably had a bad opinion of its leaders. For my family was Protestant and Conservative, and there was no social intercourse between them and the Catholics and Nationalists. But once I had caught the National spirit, and all the literature of Irish songs and sufferings had an enthralling interest for me, then it was that I discovered that I could write poetry. In sending my verses to the editor of *The Nation* I dared not have my name published, so I signed them ‘ Speranza,’ and my letters ‘ John Fenshaw Ellis,’ instead of Jane Francesca Elgee.”

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Lady Wilde did *not* commence contributing to *The Nation* in 1844, as her biographers state. Her first contributions appeared in that journal in 1847. She was at that time living with her parents at 34 Leeson Street, which is in a quarter which is the Bayswater of Dublin. Her most famous poem was entitled "A Million a Decade." These contributions were for the most part published in a small type column which preceded the leading articles, and which appears to have been reserved for the efforts of amateur contributors, answers to correspondents, etc. Later on, however, that is to say in 1848, the honours of large type and prominent position were accorded to Speranza's poems and John Fenshaw Ellis's prose.

The girl's poetry has no particular merit either of expression or of thought, and, indeed, compared unfavourably with similar verse contributed by three other young women, whose Nationalism was of a more sincere type. These were known to the readers of *The Nation* as "Eva," "Mary," and "Thomasine." In his book, "My Life in Two Hemispheres," Sir Charles Gavan Duffy speaks of Speranza as the most gifted of the four, and, indeed, describes her as "a woman of genius." At the time that that book was written the former Nationalist editor,

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the Revolutionary of 1848, was living in opulence and luxury at the Villa Marguerite in Nice; decked with a British title and enriched with British gold. His sympathies would naturally tend rather to the one of the four women who like himself had abandoned the cause of Nationalism as *une erreur de jeunesse* when that cause had become a desperate one and a more profitable field for enthusiasm and activity offered itself. Among the martyrs of 1848, not among those who had the fortune to die then, but amongst the poor, broken old men, who are dragging out penurious existences in Dublin at this very day, men who never abandoned the cause, and who will die as ardent Nationalists as they were when Duffy and Speranza fired them into acts which sent them into confinement in British gaols, neither Speranza nor Duffy are remembered, as Nationalists, with great esteem. The Fenian editor, O'Leary, states that "Speranza" was of the four poetesses on *The Nation*, the one who was considered the least talented, that Eva was held to be the most sincere and the most gifted. "Eva" was Miss Eva Mary Kelly. "Mary" was Miss Ellen Downing. As to "Thomasine" her anonymity has not been pierced.

The great effect produced by Francesca Elgee

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—it is to be noted as characteristic that she objected to the beautiful but unromantic name of Jane and never used it—was when she denounced herself in open court as the authoress of the famous article “*Jacta est Alea*,” for the publishing of which the future Sir Charles Duffy of the Villa Marguerite, Nice, was being prosecuted.

This article appeared in No. 304 (printed 304) of *The Nation* which was published in Dublin under date of Saturday, 29th July, 1848. *The Nation*, a weekly magazine journal of sixteen pages, of the size of the *Petit Journal*, which was published at sixpence, was then in its sixth volume. On the number preserved in the National Library of Ireland, in Dublin, there is written upon the front page in ink the following words: “This is The Suppressed Number. I believe it is the only copy which escaped, and that was not seized and carried to the Castle.” This statement appears to be erroneous, for other copies are in existence, including one at the British Museum.

Lady Wilde's article was the second leader on the editorial page. The leading article, presumably written by Sir Charles Gavan Duffy of the Villa Marguerite, Nice, was entitled “The Tocsin of Ireland,” and is of that kind of politi-

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cal, inflammatory writing which, once one has read it, is immediately forgotten. On this article Francesca Wilde's article follows. It is published anonymously, and fills rather more than two columns of the paper. As it is a document of essential interest in the archives of the family of the man with whom this volume deals it is reproduced *in extenso* in the following chapter, just as it was printed in *The Nation*, with the misprints italicised.

The 304th number of the revolutionary paper, edited by the future Sir Charles Gavan Duffy of the Villa Marguerite, Nice, contained much other matter which was calculated to incense the Castle. Amongst the topical articles which were published we find one on "Easy Lessons in Military Matters" by a veteran, which deals with such subjects as "Organisation," "Arms." Elsewhere in this journal the young Nationalist, who had been inflamed by the editorials of Sir Charles Gavan Duffy, was instructed "How to Break Down a Bridge, or Blow One Up," "How to buy and try a Rifle"; and valuable topical information was also given on "Casting Bullets."

It may be added that Francesca Elgee had no dealings with the other people, apart from Duffy, who were active in agitation. In a

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letter to Mr O'Donoghue, dated 13th November 1888, she writes : " I can give no information as to the workers of '48. Sir Charles Duffy would be the best authority. His address is the Villa Marguerite, Nice, France."

CHAPTER III

JACTA ALEA EST

Lady Wilde's Appeal to Arms—The Famous Article in *The Nation*—A Specimen of Revolutionary Literature—
“A Hundred Thousand Muskets!”—Terrifying the Castle
—“The Glorious Young Meagher!”—An Exact Transcript from the Copy in the National Library of Ireland.

“THE Irish Nation has at length decided. England has done us one good service at least. Her recent acts have taken away the last miserable pretext for passive submission. She has justified us before the world, and ennobled the timid, humble supplication of a degraded, insulted people, into the proud demand for independence by a resolved, prepared, and fearless Nation.

“Now, indeed, were the men of Ireland *cowards* if this moment for retribution, combat, and victory, were to pass by unemployed. It finds them slaves, but it would leave them infamous.

“Oh! for a hundred thousand muskets glittering brightly in the light of heaven, and the monumental barricades stretching across

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each of our noble streets, made desolate by England—circling round that doomed Castle, made infamous by England, where the foreign tyrant has held his council of treason and iniquity against our people and our country for seven hundred years.

“Courage rises with danger, and heroism with resolve. Does not our breath come freer, each heart beat quicker in these rare and grand moments of human life, when all doubt, and wavering, and weakness are cast to the winds, and the soul rises majestic over each petty obstacle, each low, selfish consideration, and, flinging off the fetters of prejudice, bigotry, and egotism, bounds forward into the higher, diviner life of heroism and patriotism, defiant as a conqueror, devoted as a martyr, omnipotent as a Deity !

“We appeal to the whole Irish Nation—is there any man amongst us who wishes to take one further step on the base path of sufferance and slavery ? Is there one man that thinks that Ireland has not been sufficiently insulted, that Ireland has not been sufficiently degraded in her honour and her rights, to justify her now in fiercely turning upon her oppressor ? No ! a man so infamous cannot tread the earth ; or, if he does, the voice of the coward is stifled in

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the clear, wild, ringing shout that leaps from hill to hill, that echoes from sea to sea, that peals from the lips of an ~~up~~risen Nation—' We must be free ! '

" In the name then of your trampled, insulted, degraded country ; in the name of all heroic virtues, of all that makes life illustrious or death divine ; in the name of your starved, your exiled, your *dead* ; by your martyrs in prison cells and felon chains ; in the name of God and man ; by the listening earth and the watching heaven, I call on you to make this aspiration of your souls a *deed*. Even as you read these weak words of a heart that yet palpitates with an enthusiasm as heroic as your own, and your breast heaves and your eyes grow dim with tears as the memory of Ireland's wrongs rushes upon your soul—even now lift up your right hand to heaven and swear—swear by your undying soul, by your hopes of immortality, never to lay down your arms, never to cease hostilities, till you regenerate and save this fallen land.

" Gather round the standard of your chiefs. Who dares to say he will not follow, when O'BRIEN leads ? Or who amongst you is so abject that he will grovel in the squalid misery of his hut, or be content to be flung from the ditch side into the living tomb of the poorhouse,

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rather than charge proudly like brave men and free men, with that glorious young MEAGHER at their head, upon the hired mercenaries of their enemies? One bold, one decisive move. One instant to take breath, and then arising; a rush, a charge from north, south, east and west upon the English garrison, and *the land is ours*. Do your eyes flash, do your hearts throb at the prospect of having a *country*? For you have had no country. You have never felt the pride, the dignity, the majesty of independence. You could never lift up your head to heaven and glory in the name of Irishman, for all Europe read the brand of *slave* upon your brow.

“Oh! that my words could burn like molten metal through your veins, and light up this ancient heroic daring which would make each man of you a LEONIDAS—each battle-field a Marathon—each pass a Thermopylae. Courage! need I preach to Irishmen of courage? Is it so hard a thing then to die? Alas! do we not all die daily of broken hearts and shattered hopes, and tortures of mind and body that make life a weariness, and of weariness worse even than the tortures; for life is one long, slow agony of death.

“No! it cannot be death you fear; for you have braved the plague in the exile ship of the

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Atlantic, and plague in the exile's home beyond it; and famine and ruin, and a slave's life, and a dog's death; and hundreds, thousands, a *million* of you have perished thus. Courage! You will not now belie those old traditions of humanity that tell of this divine God-gift within us. I have read of a Roman wife who stabbed herself before her husband's eyes to teach him how to die. These million deaths teach us as grand a lesson. To die for Ireland! Yes; have we not sworn it in a thousand passionate words by our poets and orators—in the grave resolves of councils, leagues and confederations. Now is the moment to test whether you value most freedom or life. Now is the moment to strike, and by striking save, and the day after the victory it will be time enough to count your dead.

“But we do not provoke this war. History will write of us—that Ireland endured wrongs unexampled by any despotism—sufferings unequalled by any people—her life-blood drained by a vampire host of foreign masters and officials—her honour insulted by a paid army of spies—her cries of despair stifled by the armed hand of legalised ruffianism—that her peasants starved while they reaped the corn for their foreign lords, because no man gave them bread—that

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her pallid artisans pined and wasted, because no man gave them work—that her men of genius, the noblest and purest of her sons, were dragged to a felon's cell, lest the people might hear the voice of *truth*, and that in this horrible atrophy of all mental and physical powers, this stagnation of all existences, whoever dared to rise and demand wherefore it was that Ireland, made so beautiful by God, was made the plague spot of the universe by man—he was branded as a *felon*—imprisoned, robbed, tortured, chained, exiled, murdered. Thus history will write of us. And she will also write, that Ireland did not start from this horrid trance of suffering and despair until 30,000 swords were at her heart, and even then she did not rise for vengeance, only *prepared to resist*. No—we are not the aggressors—we do not provoke this terrible war—Even with six million hearts to aid us, and with all the chances of success in our favour we still offer terms to England. If she capitulates even now ~~at the eleventh~~ hour, and grants the moderate, the just demands of Ireland, our arms shall not be raised to sever the golden link that unites the two nations. And the chances of success *are* all with us. There is a God-like strength in a just cause—a desperate energy in men who are fighting in their own land for the possession

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of that land. A glowing enthusiasm that scorns all danger when from success they can look onward to a future of unutterable glory and happiness for their country. Opposed to us are only a hired soldiery, and a paid police, who, mere trained machines even as they are, yet must shudder (for they are men) at the horrible task of butchery, under the blasphemed name of duty to which England summons them. Brothers many of them are of this people they are called upon to murder—sons of the same soil—fellow-countrymen of those who are heroically, struggling to elevate their common country. Surely whatever humanity is left in them will shrink from being made the sad instruments of despotism and tyranny—they will blush to receive the purchase-money of England which hires them for the accursed and fratricidal work. Would a Sicilian have been found in the ranks of Naples? Would a Milanese have been detected in the fierce hordes of Austria? No; for the Sicilians prize honour, and the stately Milanese would strike the arm to the earth that would dare to offer them Austrian gold in payment for the blood of their own countrymen. And heaven forbid that in *Ireland* could be found a band of armed fratricides to fight against their own land for the flag of a foreign tyrant.

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But if, indeed, interest or coercion should tempt them into so horrible and unnatural a position, pity, a thousand times pity for those brave officers who vaunt themselves on their honour. Pity for that brave soldiery whose Irish valour has made England illustrious, that they must stain honour, and fame, and profession, and their brave swords, by lending them to so infamous a cause. Ah! we need not tremble for a nation filled with a pure and holy enthusiasm, and fighting for all that human nature holds dear; but the masters of those hired mercenaries may well tremble for their cause, for the consciousness of eternal infamy will unnerve every arm that is raised to uphold it.

“If the government, then, do not come forward with honest, honourable and liberal concessions, let the war active and passive commence. *They* confide in the discipline of their troops—*we* in the righteousness of our cause. But not even a burning enthusiasm—which they have not—added to their discipline, could make a garrison of 30,000 men hold their ground against six millions. And one thing is certain—that if the people do not choose to fight the garrison, they may *starve* them. Adopt the Milan method—let no man sell to them. This passive warfare may be carried on in every

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village in Ireland, while more active hostilities are proceeding through all the large towns and cities. But, to gain possession of the capital should be the grand object of all efforts. Let every line converge to this point. The Castle is the key-stone of English power; take it, destroy it, burn it—at any hazard become masters of it, and on the same ground from whence proceeded all those acts of insult and infamy which aroused the just retribution of a people's vengeance, establish a government in whom the people of all classes can place confidence.

“ On this pedestal of fallen tyranny and corruption raise a structure of nobleness that will at once give security and prestige of time-honoured and trusted names to our revolution. For a people who rise to overthrow a despotism will establish no modification of it in its place. If they fight it is for absolute independence; and as the first step in a revolution should be to prevent the possibility of anarchy, the men elected to form this government ought at once to take the entire progress and organisation of the revolution under their protection and authority. It will be their duty to watch that no crime be suffered to stain the pure flag of Irish liberty. We must show to the world that

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\ we are fitted to govern ourselves ; that we are, indeed, worthy to be a free nation, that the words union, liberty, country, have as sacred a meaning in our hearts and actions as they are holy on our lips ; that patriotism means not merely the wild irresistible force that crushed tyranny, but reconstruction, regeneration, heroism, sacrifice, sublimity ; that we have not alone to break the fetters of Ireland, but to raise her to a glorious elevation—defend her, liberate her, ennoble her, sanctify her.

“ Nothing is wanting now to complete our regeneration, to ensure our success, but to cast out those vices which have disgraced our name among the nations. There are terrible traditions shadowing the word *Liberty* in Ireland. Let it be our task, men of this generation—descendants of martyrs, and sufferers, and heroes, to make it a glad evangel of happiness—a reign of truth over fictions and symbols—of intellect over prejudice and conventionalism—of humanity over tyranny and oppression. Irishmen ! this resurrection into a new life depends on you ; for we have all lain dead. Hate, distrust, oppression, disunion, selfishness, bigotry—these things are Death. We must crush all vices—annihilate all evil passions—trample on them, as a triumphant CHRIST with his foot upon the

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serpent, and then the proud hallelujah of Freedom will rise to heaven from the lips of a pure, a virtuous, a regenerated, a God-blessed people ; and this fair land of ours, which now affrights the world with its misery, will be one grand temple, in which we shall all kneel as brothers—one holy, peaceful, loving fraternity—sons of one common country—children of one God—heirs together of those blessings purchased by our blood—a heritage of freedom, justice, independence, prosperity and glory ! ”

CHAPTER IV

Lady Wilde's Nationalism—The Influence of a Single Book—Oscar Wilde's Similar Claim—Meeting between Mr Duffy and Mr Ellis—Speranza's Fine Gesture—Her Admiration for Mr Duffy—Pen-Portraits of Lady Wilde at Different Periods—How she clung to Youth—Her Fondness for Society—Eccentricities of Dress—Her Son's Resemblance to her—Her Literary Labours—A Letter to Mr O'Donoghue—Brief Summary of Conclusions.

It was probably rather by the other contents of No. 304 of *The Nation* than by the article "Jacta Alea Est," that Dublin Castle was alarmed, and deemed it advisable to order the confiscation of this number, the suppression of the journal, and the arrest and arraignment of Mr (afterwards Sir Charles) Duffy. It would be difficult otherwise to understand these extreme measures, for the article is exactly of that class of revolutionary literature which is usually read with gratification by those in power. There is no mischief to be feared from rhapsodical generalities. On the other hand, the papers giving practical advice to the malcontents on subjects so subversive as the destruction of bridges and the manipulation of fire-arms certainly warranted action. However that may be,

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it has generally been conceded to Lady Wilde that with her pen she made the Castle tremble : she stepped at once to the front as an ardent Nationalist and patriot ; and of none of her writings were her sons perhaps more proud than of the article which is given in the preceding chapter. Her Nationalism was, of course, not sincere. It could not be. She had been trained as a Protestant and a Conservative. Her relations, those of whom she was most proud, were beneficed dignitaries under the British Crown, just as later her husband was to become by appointment, warrant and viceregal favour, a dependent of British Royal favour, and she herself during the last six years of her life was to draw from the Civil List a small alimony of imperial silver. No patriotism, no national spirit can be fired in man or woman by the perusal of a single book ; and of D'Alton Williams' work it may be said that it inspires nothing but *ennui*. It is not in this way that the Joans of Arc are driven forth to battle. It, is, of course, probable that it was the perusal of this book which suggested to the young woman that evils existed, that here was a field for her literary activity, and that her spasmodic Nationalism was the result. It showed the young woman's practical sense that this National-

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ism was only spasmodic; for as we look back on the period of more than half-a-century which has elapsed since she first manifested its spirit, we observe that it has not been the worldly wise amongst Irish men and women who have espoused the National cause. For the true Nationalist there have been the galleys, the rifle, the scaffold, and, as a set-off from the derision of the worldly wise, the mute gratitude of the voiceless people and a martyr's crown. Lady Wilde's *crassa Minerva* did not allow her to cling to a cause of which she was so soon to discover that it was a hopeless one. Her Nationalism, if whim it were, she readily abandoned, and she did not go through life explaining that the perusal of a single book had entirely changed the current of her thoughts, her purposes and aims. This was one of the mistakes that was made by her son, Oscar. It pleased him to say that some single book, which had come into his hands when he was a young man, had thus revolutionised his entire mentality; and he attributed to the influence of this book all the things that seemed to have been prompted in him by what was not common-sense. In a passage in "The Picture of Dorian Gray," he describes how the hero of that novel fell under the influence of a single book. "It was the

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strangest book that he had ever read. It seemed to him that, in exquisite raiment, and to the delicate sound of flutes, the sins of the world were passing in dumb show before him. . . . It was a poisonous book. The heavy odour of incense seemed to cling about its pages, and to trouble the brain. The mere cadence of the sentences, the subtle monotony of their music, so full as it was of complex refrains, and movements, elaborately repeated, produced in the mind of the lad, as he passed from chapter to chapter, a form of reverie, a malady of dreaming, that made him unconscious of the falling day and the creeping shadows. . . . For years Dorian Gray could not free himself from the influence of this book."

This is, of course, silliness. Yet Oscar Wilde used to make the same silly, self-deceiving statement about himself, and attributed to some "poisonous book" which he had once read many of the abnormalities of his conduct. In this, no doubt, he was prompted by the story which he had heard at home as a boy, how the mother whom he so admired and so loved had been prompted to action and to an entire renunciation of early principles and creeds by the reading of a single book. The fact that the influence of this book

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had been of the briefest was entirely overlooked.

The story of the first meeting between the editor of *The Nation* and "John Fenshaw Ellis" is well-known. It may, however, be repeated here, with the addition of Lady Wilde's own account of how it was that having long refused to let Mr Duffy call upon her she finally gave him permission to do so.

"After a while," she relates, "Mr Duffy wished me to call at the office, and again 'Mr Ellis' had to excuse himself from doing it. One day my nurse came into my room and found *The Nation* on my table. Then she accused me of contributing to it, declaring the while that such a seditious paper was fit only for the fire. The secret being out in my own family there was no longer much motive for concealment, and I gave my editor permission to call upon me. Even then, as Sir Charles Duffy has since told me he scarcely knew who 'Speranza' might be, and great was his surprise, therefore, when I stepped out from an inner room."

Sir Charles Duffy relates in his "Young Ireland" that "Mr Ellis, whom he had frequently requested to call upon him at *The Nation* office, pleaded that there were difficulties which rendered this course impracticable. Finally, Mr

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Ellis asked the editor to call at 34 Leeson Street. Going to the house Duffy states that he was met by Sir George Smith, publisher to Dublin University, who presented him to Miss Jane Francesca Elgee, whom he describes as a tall girl, whose stately carriage and figure, flashing brown eyes, and features cast in an heroic mould seemed fit for the genius of poetry or the spirit of the revolution."

After the suppression of *The Nation*, most of the leaders of the revolutionary movement were transported for treason-felony; while Mr (afterwards Sir Charles) Duffy was put on trial for sedition. The attorney-general quoted from the article "Jacta Alea Est" in support of the charge, and declared that that article was sufficient to convict the prisoner at the bar. "I am the culprit, if culprit there be," cried a voice from the gallery of the court, and a young woman rose to her feet. It was Jane Francesca Elgee who by this fine gesture endeared herself for ever to the Irish Nation. The result was to trouble the minds of the jury; they disagreed; and the editor of *The Nation* was discharged to pursue his career more profitably to himself in another hemisphere.

Speranza's admiration for this man appears to have been very great. The following is one

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of the many letters she wrote to him after her identity had been disclosed.

“ 34 LEESON STREET, *Monday.*

“ MY DEAR SIR,—I return with many thanks the volume of Cromwell which has been travelling about with me for the last four months, and shall feel obliged for the two others when you are quite at leisure, though not even Carlyle can make this soulless iconoclast interesting. It is the only work of Carlyle's I have met with in which my heart does not go along with his words.

“ I cannot forbear telling you, now the pen is in my hand, how deeply impressed I felt by your opening lecture to your club. It was the sublimest teaching, and the style so simple from its very sublimity—it seemed as if truth passed directly from your heart to ours, without the aid of any medium—at least I felt that everywhere the *thoughts* struck you, nowhere the words, and this in my opinion is the perfection of composition. It is soul speaking to soul. I never felt the *dignity* of your cause so much as then—to promote it any way seemed an object that would ennoble a life. Truly, we cannot despair when God sends us such teachers. But you will wish me away for another four happy

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months if I write you such long notes. So I shall conclude with kind compliments to Mrs Duffy, and remain, yours very sincerely,

“FRANCESCA ELGEE.

“I only *read* your lecture—some time or other I would like to *hear* you.”

A year or two before she died in the dismal house in Oakley Street, Chelsea, which her son William and his family shared with her, and of which her son Oscar paid the rent, Lady Wilde said to a young Irish poet :

“I must go and live up Primrose Hill; I was an eagle in my youth.”

By various writers various pictures have been given of this extraordinary woman at various periods in her life. There are many people still living in Dublin who remember No. 1 Merrion Square when it was *the* salon of the capital. On reception nights the crush of people in the drawing-rooms upstairs used to be so great that it was a familiar spectacle that of Lady Wilde elbowing her way through the crush and crying out, “How ever am I to get through all these people.”

As her beauty departed from her with the advance of years, Lady Wilde used to darken the rooms in which visitors saw her. Stories

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got about that the purpose of this was to conceal some disfiguring mark on her face; but the fact was merely that she did not wish people to notice the difference that Time had wrought on the features and complexion of the beautiful "Speranza" of 1848. A Miss Corkran gives the following account of a call she paid to Lady Wilde at No. 1 Merrion Square, an account which is not characterised by much sympathy or kindness:—

"I called at Merrion Square late in the afternoon, for Lady Wilde never received anyone until 5 P.M., as she hated strong lights; the shutters were closed, and the lamps had pink shades, though it was full daylight. A very tall woman—she looked over six feet high—she wore that day a long crimson silk gown which swept the floor. The skirt was voluminous, underneath there must have been two crinolines, for when she walked there was a peculiar swaying, swelling movement, like that of a vessel at sea, with the sails filled with wind. Over the crimson silk were flounces of Limerick lace, and round what had been a waist an Oriental scarf embroidered with gold was twisted. The long, massive, handsome face was plastered with powder. Over her blue-black, glossy hair was a gilt crown of laurels. Her

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throat was bare, so were her arms, but they were covered with quaint jewellery. On her broad chest was fastened a series of large miniature brooches, evidently family portraits . . . this gave her the appearance of a walking family mausoleum. She wore white kid gloves, held a scent-bottle, a lace handkerchief, and a fan. Lady Wilde reminded me of a tragedy queen at a suburban theatre.”

Lady Wilde was very popular in Dublin with the people. It is related that “they used to cheer her when she was on her way to the drawing-rooms at the Castle”; just because some years previously she had urged a hundred thousand musketeers to march upon that very Castle, and to wipe it off the face of Ireland.

In the story of “An Unhappy Friendship” we find the following reference to Lady Wilde at home in her son William’s house in Park Street, Grosvenor Square, in 1883:—

“During the first days of my stay there Oscar Wilde took me to a reception at his mother’s house. . . . I was presented as having a volume of poems in the press, and was graciously received. Later on, as I was standing talking to Anna Kingsford, Lady Wilde, holding some primroses in her hand, crossed the drawing-room, repeating; ‘Flowers for the poet! Flowers

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for the poet ! ' It was for me that they were intended, for she came up to me and decorated my coat with the posy."

Lady Wilde was at that time about fifty-seven years of age. She had by then entirely renounced her natural, feminine, and pathetic endeavours to conceal the march of Time. Her receptions were in broad daylight, the deceptive flambeaux with their pink-shades had been put away till nightfall. She was a strikingly handsome woman. *C'était quelqu'un*. Her voice had a peculiar power and a peculiar charm. She seemed happy ; poverty and disaster had not yet come upon her ; her sons were both full of promise and achievement. There were to be noticed few of the peculiarities of dress to which Miss Corkran calls attention. Yet her black silk bodice was as covered with large old-fashioned medallions as is with orders on Garter nights the *brochette* of the diplomat whose back has been supple all through life.

Her clinging to youth, her efforts to mask the advance of age, her horror for the stigmata of physical decay were all characteristics which she transmitted to her son Oscar. His books are full of rhapsodical eulogies of youth ; he never tires of satirising and condemning maturity and old age. In the same way her fondness for

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large, showy and curious articles of jewellery, which, especially amongst the Jews, is a trait which often characterises men and women of genius, was directly transmitted to this son.

The gradual descent of this woman in the social scale is one of the pathetic stories of literary history. This ex-revolutionary had for the society of the wealthy, the titled, the distinguished, the same pronounced liking which was noticed in Oscar Wilde, also. As long as it was possible for her to do so, indeed until at last broken down by disappointment and illness she finally took to the bed where she breathed her last after an agony of many months, she held her drawing-rooms. But the imperial days of Merrion Square, even the semi-aristocratic reunions of Park Street, were of the past. In the dingy house in Oakley Street, fit scene for the unspeakable tragedies that Time held in its lap, the gatherings were the shabby-genteel burlesque of a literary salon. Miss Hamilton has given a picture of such a reception in this house, which shows us Lady Wilde just before she resigned herself to desolation and solitude :—

“ I had an invitation,” writes Miss Hamilton, “ to her Saturday ‘At Homes,’ and on a dull, muggy December day, I reached the house. The hour on the card said, ‘From five to seven,’

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and it was past five when I knocked at the door. The bell was broken. The narrow hall was heaped with cloaks, waterproofs, and umbrellas, and from the door—for the reception-rooms were on the ground-floor—came a confusing buzz of voices. Anglo-Irish and American, Irish literary people, to say nothing of a sprinkling of brutal Saxons, were crowded together as thickly as sardines in a box. Red-shaded lamps were on the mantelpiece, red curtains, veiled doors and windows; and through this darkness visible I looked vainly for the hostess. Where was she? Where was Lady Wilde? Then I saw her—a tall woman, slightly bent with rheumatism, fantastically dressed in a trained black and white checkered silk gown; from her head floated long, white tulle streamers, mixed with ends of scarlet ribbon. What glorious dark eyes she had! Even then, and she was over sixty, she was a strikingly handsome woman. Though I was a perfect stranger to her, she at once made me welcome, and introduced me to someone she thought I would like to know. She had the *art de faire un salon*. If anyone was discovered sitting in a corner unnoticed, Lady Wilde was sure to bring up someone to be introduced, and she never failed to speak a few happy words, which made the

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stranger feel at home. She generally prefaced her introductions with some remarks such as 'Mr A., who has written a delightful poem,' or Miss B., who is on the staff of 'The Snap-dragon,' or 'Mrs C., whose new novel everyone is talking about.' As to her own talk it was remarkably original, sometimes daring, and always interesting. Her talent for talk was infectious; everyone talked their best. There was tea in the back room, but no one seemed to care about eating and drinking. Some forms of journalism had no attraction for her. 'I can't write,' I heard her say, 'about such things as Mrs Green looked very well in black, and Mrs Black looked very well in green.' "

Miss Hamilton also relates the following characteristic anecdote about Lady Wilde.

"When I was at Oakley Street one day, I asked what time it was, as I wanted to catch a train.

" 'Does anyone here,' asked 'Lady Wilde, with one of her lofty glances, 'know what time it is? We never know in this house about Time.'

"This," adds Miss Hamilton, "it seems to me, was a key to the way in which Lady Wilde looked at things. Trifles, everyday trifles, she considered quite beneath her; and yet trifles

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make up the sum of human life. She had a horror of the 'miasma of the commonplace'; her eyes were fixed on ideals, on heroes, ancient and modern—and thus she missed much, that was lying near her, 'close to her feet,' in her fervent admiration of the dim, the distant and the unapproachable."

The great caricaturist Dickens, whose notice few of his distinguished contemporaries escaped, seems to have studied some of Lady Wilde's peculiarities from afar, and the results of his observations may be found here and there in his books.

After her marriage "Speranza," abandoning poetry and the Young Ireland Movement of which she had sung:—

"We stand in the light of a dawning day
With its glory creation flushing;
And the life-currents up from the pris'ning clay,
Through the world's great heart are rushing.
While from peak to peak of the spirit land
A voice unto voice is calling:
'The night is over, the day is at hand,
And the fetters of earth are falling!'"

turned to prose.

In a letter dated from Oakley Street in '88 she writes to Mr D. J. O'Donoghue the following account of her literary and journalistic labours.

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“ DEAR SIR,

“ In answer to the inquiries contained in your note I have to state that I contributed to many periodicals in London, amongst others to *The University Magazine*, *Tinsley's Magazine*, *The Burlington Magazine*, *The Woman's World*, *The Queen*, *The Lady's Pictorial*, *The Pall Mall Gazette*, and others whose names I cannot now recall. The more important writings of recent years are :—‘ *Driftwood from Scandinavia* ’ (Bentley, 1. vol. 1867); ‘ *Ancient Irish Legends* ’ (Ward and Downey, 2 vols. 1887); *The American Irish*, a political pamphlet, Dublin.

“ But I have recently devoted myself more to literature than to politics. Nationality was certainly the first awakener of any mental power of genius within me, and the strongest sentiments of my intellectual life, but the present state of Irish affairs requires the strong guiding hand of men, there is no place any more for the more passionate aspirations of a woman's nature.”

In another letter to Mr O'Donoghue she states: “ Also I did *not* write in 1844 for *The Nation*, nor did I write ‘ *The Chosen Leader*. ’ ”

The following is a list of the best known among the books of Lady Wilde—“ Poems by

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'Speranza,' 1871; "Driftwood from Scandinavia," 1884; "Ancient Legends, Mystic Charms and Superstitions of Ireland," (2 vols. 1887); "Ancient Cures, Charms and Usages of Ireland," 1890; "Social Studies," 1893.

"She further," wrote *The Times* biographer of her after her death, "translated several French and German works, and was the author of 'Ugo Bassi,' a tale of the Italian Revolution in verse, published in 1857; 'The First Temptation,' 1863; 'The Glacier Land,' adapted from Dumas; 'The Wanderer and his Home,' adapted from Lamartine; and 'Pictures from the First French Revolution,' 1865-1875. In 1880 she issued the concluding portion of her husband's 'Memoir of Béranger.'"

She was never photographed; and the only portraits which survive are engravings from pictures.

Many of her writings were never published. Her poems are still read; and that there is still a demand for her two books, "Ancient Cures," and "Ancient Legends," is shown by the fact that these two books were included in the recently-issued catalogue of a large new book-lending enterprise.

Both these books, however, according to Lady Wilde's own statement, were largely taken

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from materials collected by, or for her husband. "He would employ very many people," she related once, "schoolmasters in the villages chiefly, who could speak both Irish and English, to investigate and collect all the local traditions, superstitions, etc., of the peasantry. When he died a great amount of material had been collected, much of which I have published in the last year or so in the volumes entitled 'Ancient Cures, Charms and Usages of Ireland,' and 'Ancient Legends of Ireland.' Sir William had a passion for such research; and in recognition of his services the Royal Irish Academy gave him its gold medal."

This detailed investigation into the immediate parentage and remoter affinities and relationships of Oscar Wilde has afforded us many data which will go towards enabling the student of his life to understand some points in his complex character as well as a few of his peculiarities. Of these some came to him by direct inheritance, in his blood, so to say; others were the result of that instinctive imitation of their parents and such of their kinsfolk as are held up as examples for their reverence and admiration which all children practise. Psychological influences have also been indicated.

It may be well in conclusion to sum up under

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their different headings certain characteristics of his which we are now able to trace back to their source. Under "direct inheritance," or "transmission by blood," may, perhaps, be classed his literary capacity, his gifts of poetry, languages, of ready mastery of difficult studies, his love of the beautiful, the sound common-sense of his normal periods, his family and personal pride, and his moral courage in the face of danger, but also an indifference to the dangers of alcoholism, an aversion from failure, physical, social and mental, an exaggerated esteem, on the other hand, for wealth, titles and social success, a tolerance for moral laxness.

The instinctive imitation of childhood may explain his love for eccentricity in dress, his professions of an adoration for youth and a hatred for old age, his claim that the perusal of a single book entirely revolutionised his mentality.

This rough classification is only advanced tentatively, as a suggestion, and with all due awe for the complex mysteries of the human soul. The psychology of an Oscar Wilde is not to be resolved into elemental factors by human intelligence. But the few data arrived at may render the problem of that psychology less bewildering, and at the same time, because of

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the very dimness of the light which they cast, impress us with the magnitude and the obscurity of the problem. Now it is not right or lawful for man, to judge or to condemn that which he cannot understand. When God withholds His light either on the acts or on the motives of a fellow man it means nothing more than this, that He reserves the judging of that man's acts and thoughts for His own ^{sup}reme tribunal.

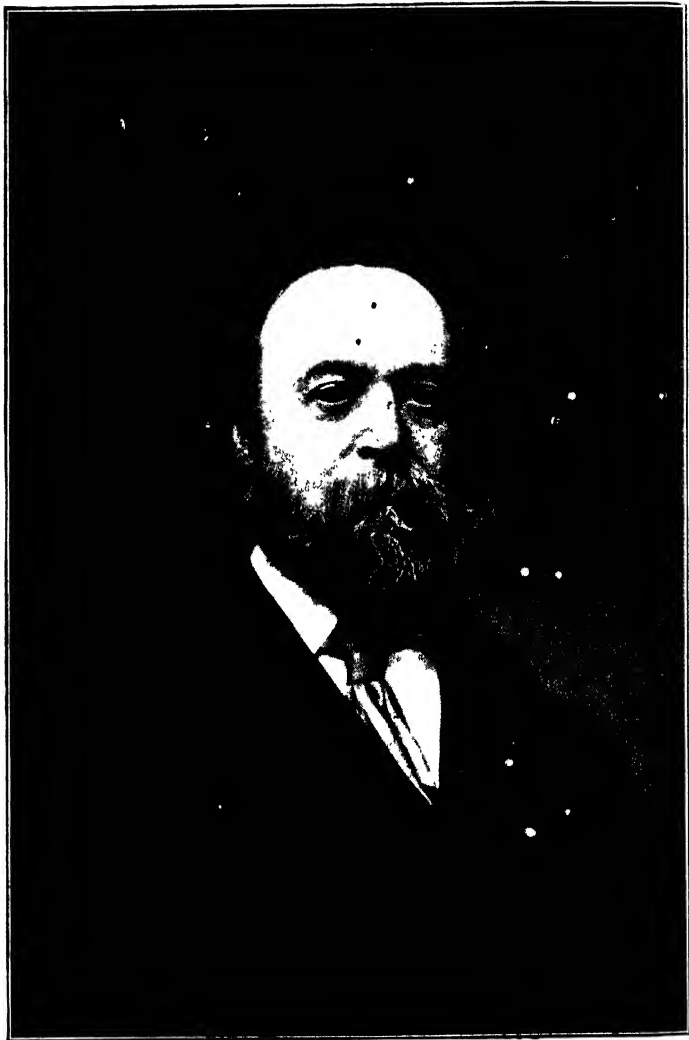
CHAPTER V

Oscar Wilde's Christening—The Selection of his Names—His Later Dislike of them—No. 1 Merrion Square—The Merrion Square Jarvey—Oscar Wilde and the Cab-drivers—Oscar and his Brother—Oscar's Sister—His Poem on her Death—His Early Upbringing—His Precocity—His Knowledge of French—His Home-Life—An Artificial Atmosphere—Dangerous Environment—Sir William Wilde's Love of Nature—Oscar's Abhorrence from Nature—His Enunciations on the Subject—Oscar Wilde's Writings, Sincere, not Paradoxical.

SUCH was the parentage of the child who was born on 16th October 1854, at No. 1 Merrion Square, in the mournful city of Dublin ; whose advent, because he was a boy, was a disappointment to his mother, and who for a long time after his birth was treated as a girl, talked to as a girl, dressed as a girl. His father did not share his wife's caprice, and for his second son selected names of singular virility. These names were so chosen as to proclaim to the world the lad's close association by blood with the history of Ireland. Oscar is good Celtic, it is a name closely connected with Irish legend and record. And here another negation is necessary. Oscar Wilde was not the god-son of the Duke of

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Ostergötland, although Speranza allowed it to be understood that it had been after this princely friend of the family that the boy was called. People living in Dublin, who remember the christening and all the circumstances connected with that ceremony have stated that at the time of Oscar's birth the Wildes were not acquainted with the gentleman who is now the King of Sweden. The myth was one of those *Schwaermereien* on the part of Lady Wilde, to which reference has already been made. It is certain that before Oscar's birth the personality of the poet-prince must have greatly occupied Speranza's thoughts for the personal resemblance between Oscar Wilde and the King of Sweden was one which struck everyone who knew the two men. More particularly was this resemblance a striking one between the prince as a student at Upsala and Oscar Wilde as a student at Oxford. On page 39 of Dr Josef Linck's biography of "King Oscar" ("Konung Oscar," Adolf Bonnier, Stockholm) there appeared a portrait of the young duke, which vividly reminds one of Oscar Wilde at the same age. However, it appears to be the fact that the child's name was chosen by his father, who wanted him to have a good ancient Irish name. For the same reason he also caused his son to



● Photo by Elliot & Fry.

W. G. WILLS, PAINTER AND DRAMATIST. COUSIN TO OSCAR WILDE.

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be christened Fingal and O'Flaherty; the latter from those "wild O'Flahertys" from whom Cromwell's soldiers in an addendum to the Litany prayed God to deliver them. At the same time the additional name of Wills was bestowed upon the boy. The motive of this selection was the same. It was to affirm his Irish nationality. The Wills family were wealthy county people who had been settled for over three hundred years in Ireland. It was a General Wills of this family, who, with General Carpenter, crushed the legitimate hopes of the loyal party at the Battle of the Boyne. With this family the Wildes were closely connected, and in a near degree Oscar Wilde was cousin to that gifted man, W. G. Wills, the dramatist, painter and poet. On the two cousins the wonderful of dramaturgy had descended together with an allied strain of eccentricity, which, however, differed in its developments in the two favoured yet unhappy kinsmen.

The second son of William Wilde by his marriage to Jane Francesca Elgee was accordingly christened, Oscar Fingal O'Flaherty Wills Wilde. In his youth and early manhood he was proud of these sounding patronymics. Later on he discarded the use of them. They irritated him. To refer to them was to pro-

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voke his great anger. They classified him; they labelled him; they wrote him down as *de son village*; and this was intolerable to him, to his cosmopolitan sense, to his disdain for partisanship, politics and protestations. He had a strong aversion from what was local in interest, from what was *outré* and self-assertive; and in all these ways his Irish Christian names offended his taste. For the rest Oscar Wilde never willingly placed himself on the losing side in any division of men. Irishmen and Irish matters have always been as unpopular in the London society to which he aspired, as they are in lower spheres of the Anglo-Saxon Mob; and although Oscar Wilde never denied his nationality he took particular care not to let it transpire. In some circles in Dublin it is held that he was an ardent Irish patriot, that the mantle that Speranza wore in '48 had descended upon his broad shoulders, that it was this very pride as an Irishman which prevented him from fleeing from a British Court of Justice when the opportunity offered itself to him so to do. If this was so he was able to dissimulate here also with astonishing skill.

It was amongst luxurious surroundings that the child was reared. His father's house is one of the best houses in the best part of Dublin—

THE CAMP, FROM THE PAVEMENT



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and good houses in the Irish capital are very good indeed. They are mute witnesses, as are also the fine broad streets to-day, of former opulence and splendour. There are few houses in London or other big English cities which can compare in comfort, amplitude, elegance and decoration with a very large number of the Dublin bourgeois palaces. No. 1 Merrion Square, which is a corner house, is situated in one of the pleasantest and most convenient parts of the town. From the front the windows overlook the Merrion Square Gardens ; there is a large garden at the back, and on the right is Lincoln Place. The house, which is now occupied by a dentist, is painted red on the Lincoln Place front, and the windows which look out on this side are of an Oriental style of architecture. It is a big, solid, substantial bourgeois house which makes some pretensions to originality and artisticness. It looks the ideal residence for a successful professional man who stands well at court, but it hardly strikes one as the fit dwelling-place for a revolutionary poetess, or as the birthplace of a man of genius who over shifting, lifting deeps and by circuitous routes was to come to a death-bed so forlorn and sombre. No tablet yet records the fact that in this house was born the author of "The Soul of Man," or of "De Profundis" ;

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but on the tablets of the people's memory that record is engraved. Just opposite the house, at the corner of the gardens, is a cab-stand, and amongst the drivers is an elderly man who, when he sees any stranger looking up at No. 1 Merrion Square, touches his hat and says that his honour is no doubt looking at the house where "Sir Oscar Wilde" was born. The stranger may answer that he did not know that the poet had been knighted also, and then the jarvey says that "Sure and he was," that he was a great poet besides, and that as a lad, he had often driven the gentleman. He speaks of it with pride, as a thing to be remembered, and he has nothing but good things to say of the young man who was kind and genial, and who paid handsomely for each "set-down." Oscar Wilde was always a good friend to cab-drivers. At the time of his trial he was known as "one of the best riders in Chelsea" amongst the cabmen. He must, in his opulent days, have spent many hundred pounds a year in cabs. At one period he used to take a cab by the day, and the first address that he used to give to the driver was the Burlington Arcade where there was a florist's shop, where every day he fetched for himself a buttonhole flower costing half-a-guinea, and another costing half-a-crown for his

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cabman for the day. The Dublin cabman does not recollect that his young patron had any partiality for buttonhole flowers, but he remembers that even in those days, Oscar Wilde would not drive in a cab which was drawn by a white horse, as he considered this most unlucky. For the rest, he speaks of the young man, as of all the Wilde family, with respect and regret. "It was a sad day," he says, "when they went across the water."

As children the brothers William and Oscar were great friends; and Oscar Wilde in after life frequently spoke of their mutual attachment. "I had a toy bear," he once related, "of which I was very fond indeed, so fond that I used to take it to bed with me, and I thought that nothing could make me more unhappy than to lose my bear. Well, one day Willy asked me for it; and I was so fond of Willy that I gave it to him, I remember, without a pang. Afterwards, however, the enormity of the sacrifice I had made impressed itself upon me. I considered that such an act merited the greatest gratitude and love in return, and whenever Willy crossed me in any way I used to say: "Willy, you don't deserve my bear. Give me back my bear." And for years afterwards, after we had grown up, whenever we had a slight quarrel, I used to

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say the same: "Willy, you don't deserve my bear. You must give me back my bear." He used to laugh at this recollection.

A third child was born to Lady Wilde, the daughter she had longed for. "She was like a golden ray of sunshine dancing about our home," Oscar Wilde used to say of this sister. She did not live to reach womanhood; her loss was the greatest grief that Lady Wilde knew until. . . . One of Oscar Wilde's most beautiful poems, a *Requiescat*, which appears in his first volume of poems, is dedicated to the girl's memory. He writes of her:—

"She hardly knew
She was a woman,
So softly she grew."

There is one verse which renders a thought which must have come to all who mourn the dead:—

"Coffinboard, heavy stone,
Lie on her breast.
I vex my heart alone;
She is at rest."

Already as a very small boy Oscar gave proof of great cleverness. A great novelist of Irish birth relates how as a boy he accompanied his mother to call on Lady Wilde, who was just then staying at a country house on the borders

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of Mayo and Galway, where Sir William Wilde had an estate. The caller asked Lady Wilde about the boys, and she answered: "Willy is all right, but Oscar is wonderful, wonderful. He can do anything." He was then nine years of age. In an article which Ernest La Jeunesse wrote about him after his death in Paris, the French critic referring to Wilde's wonderful knowledge and capacity said: "Il savait tout." Indeed, few men have so impressed their contemporaries with the feeling of omniscience.

In a biographical notice of Oscar Wilde, which appeared in 1891, is the following passage, referring to his early education.

"The son of two remarkable people, Mr Wilde had a remarkable upbringing. From his earliest childhood his principal companions were his father and mother and their friends. Now wandering about Ireland with the former in quest of archæological treasures, now listening in Lady Wilde's salon to the wit and thought of Ireland, the boy, before his eighth year had learnt the ways to 'the shores of old romance.' had seen all the apples plucked from the tree of knowledge, and had gazed with wondering eyes into 'the younger day.' This upbringing suited his idiosyncrasy; indeed, with his temperament it is impossible to conceive what else could

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have been done with him. He had, of course, tutors, and the run of a library containing the best literature, and went to a Royal school ; but it was at his father's dinner-table and in his mother's drawing-room that the best of his early education was obtained. Another experience, unusual to boyhood, had a powerful formative influence. He travelled much in France and Germany, becoming acquainted with the works of Heine and Goethe, but more especially with French literature and the French temperament. It was in France, at an age when other boys are grinding at grammar or cricket, that Oscar Wilde began to realise in some measure what he was. There he found himself for the first time in a wholly congenial environment. The English temperament—there are those who deny that such a thing exists—'like sweet bells jangled, out of tune and harsh' responds indifferently to the æsthetic. In France Mr Wilde found everywhere exquisite susceptibility to beauty, and found also that he himself, an Irish Celt, possessed this susceptibility in all its intensity. French and Greek literature were the two earliest passions of his artistic life."

That he was familiar with German literature as a boy is not the case, and it is also doubtful

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if the French environment revealed to the lad anything within himself of which he was not aware. There is no special susceptibility to beauty in France ; indeed, in few countries is more profound indifference displayed by the great mass of the people to the wonderful natural and artistic beauty with which the country is endowed. In Oscar Wilde's youth the very beauties which he was afterwards to celebrate in periods so eloquent were the derision of the majority. As a young man Oscar Wilde used to echo the foolish contempt of Lamartine which was the fashionable attitude of the *cognoscenti* in France in his boyhood. Lamartine, expounded by him, appeared a French Martin Tupper. And this is but an instance. His visits to France seemed to have laid the foundations of that great knowledge of the French language which he displayed in the writing of "Salomé." As to the writing and language of this play, the best French critics are unanimous in expressing their wonder that any foreigner could have acquired such a mastery of the French language, its beauties and intricacies. But as Ernest La Jeunesse has said : "Il savait tout." French was so familiar to him that, as he used to say, "he often thought in French." As a preparation for a

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literary career in England this was not a good thing. The most successful writer knows only the tongue in which he writes. Linguistic attainment spoils the mother-language for the unilingual reader. The average Englishman cannot "follow" the writer who at times thinks in a tongue which is not his own. He revolts against similes, deductions, points of view which are not English. The man whose books translate well into foreign languages is not likely to be very highly appreciated in his own country. That is why, perhaps, it has been said that posterity begins at the frontier. There are exceptions of course. Gerard de Nerval's translation of Goethe's "Faust" was such a beautiful work that Goethe himself wrote to the French poet to compliment him on the authorship of the French "Faust." But "Faust" is in itself an exception. It is what the Germans call a "Weltstueck," a term, by the way, which they have also applied to "Salomé." Shakespeare reads badly in foreign translations even where the son of Hugo, under Victor Hugo's guidance, writes the version. Dickens never appealed to foreign nations in any degree equivalently to his wonderful influence on his countrymen.

It was an artificial atmosphere in which the

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lad, Oscar, was reared. It is wonderful that he escaped that taint of precocity for which the English dictionary has another and a less euphonious term. It is more wonderful still that until his inherent madness broke out he escaped the taint of moral laxness which infected the air of his father's house. Here high thinking did not go hand in hand with plain living. The house was a hospitable one ; it was a house of opulence and carouse ; of late suppers and deep drinking ; of careless talk and example. His father's gallantries were the talk of Dublin. Even his mother, although a woman of spotless life and honour, had a loose way of talking which might have been full of danger to her sons. A saying of hers is still remembered in Dublin, which gives an echo of the way in which her attitude of revolt against the accepted and the commonplace prompted her to mischievous talk. " There has never been a woman yet in this world who wouldn't have given the top off the milkjug to some man if she had met the right one." The mother's salon, the father's supper-table were frequented by boozy and boisterous Bohemians, than whom no city more than Dublin furnishes stranger specimens. How free was the conversation which went on there in the presence of the two lads may be

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gathered from a remark which Oscar Wilde once made to a fellow-undergraduate at Trinity College. "Come home with me," he said, "I want to introduce you to my mother. We have founded a Society for the Suppression of Virtue." This statement, of course, partook of the nature of those remarks as to which a Prefect of Police in Paris once asked Charles Baudelaire, the poet, why a man of his genius often spoke in so foolish a way. "Pour étonner les sots," answered Baudelaire. "~~It~~ was to astonish fools," without any doubt, that Oscar Wilde so spoke on that occasion, for there was no cleaner-lived young man than he. But his words show the prevailing moral atmosphere at home, and the dangers to which he was exposed. And no doubt also that having been exposed all through his youth to the contagion of immorality his powers of resistance against moral disease had been so weakened that when the attack came he had not the strength to overcome it. There is a great analogy, between physical and mental diseases. This record should teach a lesson to parents which they would do well to lay to heart.

By his father as a lad he was taught to admire the beauties of Nature, but it did not appear in after life that he shared Sir William's en-

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thusiasm. Though he wrote much and well about flowers and birds and the beauties of the land under the moving seasons, he used to describe the country as "rather tedious"; and to the end remained a dweller in cities. Atmospheric effects, the planets and the stars, the lights on land and sea, though he recognised their utility for poetical description, certainly never aroused emotions within him. Of Sir William, on the other hand, it is related that one night after everybody had retired to rest in the house which he owned at Howth, at the seaside near Dublin, a terrific storm having broken out overhead, he dragged a reluctant guest from his bed and up to the top of the house, there to admire with him the wonderful effects of the lightning flashes over the sea. "He kept me there for nearly an hour," related this guest afterwards, "and showed the greatest enthusiasm for the spectacle. I was far from sharing his excitement. It was drenching wet, and we were both lightly clad. Yet he kept appealing to me to join him in saying that it was the most wonderful night that I had ever spent." Oscar held that the monotony of life spent amidst rustic surroundings was fatal to artistic production. "One can only write in cities," he wrote in a letter to one of his friends,

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“ the country hanging on one walls in the grey mists of Corot, or the opal mornings that Daubigny has given us.” In the same letter, he speaks of “ the splendid whirl and swirl of life in London.” His dislike for Nature and the natural life as contrasted to artificiality; and that mode of existence which claims to be the outcome of the highest civilisation developed as he grew older. The utterances of Vivian (through whose mouth Oscar Wilde speaks) where he decries Nature in “ The Decay of Lying ” are not so much brilliant paradox. They are the sincere expressions of Oscar Wilde’s feeling on the subject. The passage from the first essay in “ Intentions ” may be quoted here.

“ *Vivian* : Enjoy Nature ! I am glad to say that I have entirely lost that faculty. People tell us that Art makes us love Nature more than we loved her before ; that it reveals her secrets to us ; and that after a careful study of Corot and Constable we see things in her that had escaped our observation. My own experience is that the more we study Art, the less we care for Nature. What Art really reveals to us is Nature’s lack of design, her curious crudities, her extraordinary monotony, her absolutely

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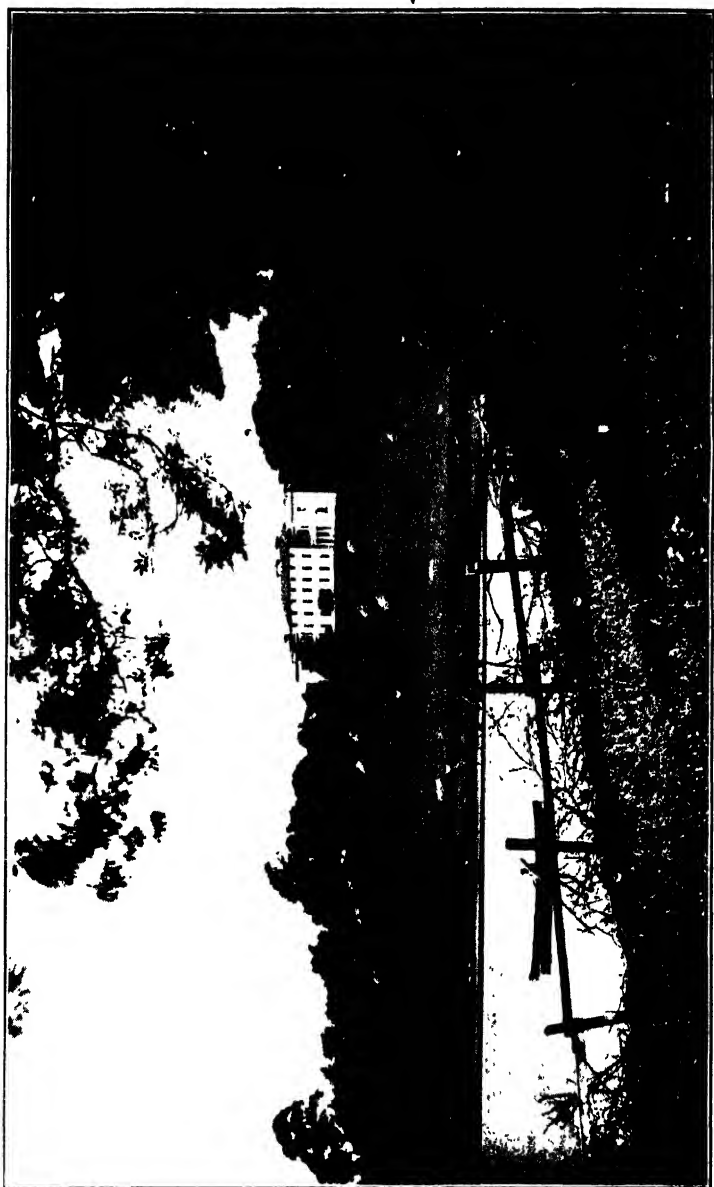
unfinished condition. Nature has good intentions, of course, but, as Aristotle once said, she cannot carry them out. When I look at a landscape, I cannot help seeing all its defects. It is fortunate for us, however, that Nature is so imperfect, as otherwise we should have had no art at all. Art is our spirited protest, our gallant attempt to teach Nature her proper place. As for the infinite variety of Nature, that is a pure myth. . . . ”

A little lower down, Vivian continues :—
“ But Nature is so uncomfortable. Grass is hard and lumpy and damp, and full of dreadful black insects. Why even Morris’s poorest workman could make you a more comfortable seat than the whole of Nature can. . . . If Nature had been comfortable mankind would never have invented architecture, and I prefer houses to the open air. In a house we all feel of the proper proportions. Everything is subordinated to us, fashioned for our use and our pleasure. Egotism itself, which is indoor life.”

People have been wont to point to “ Intentions ” as masterpieces of paradox. The truth is that these essays contain in paradoxical form Wilde’s most orthodox creeds. The vigour with which he enunciates his opinions proceeds, no

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doubt, from the knowledge that there is much pretence, not to say hypocrisy, in the general definitions of what is good and beautiful. This hypocrisy stirred his indignation and gave impetus to his pen. What ordinary man or woman of the world really cares for Nature in preference to urban haunts? What sincerity is there in the gushing rhapsodies about the beauties of the country to which it is fashionable to give utterance. How many times does the London dame or squire look up to the stars?



CHAPTER VI

Portora Royal School—Its Sectarian Character—Prompt Disillusionment—Oscar's Proficiency—Incapacity for Arithmetic—His Appearance as a Boy—His Precocity in a Dangerous Talent—His Fondness for Dress—His Unpopularity—His Eager Thirst for Knowledge—His Excellent Character—Matriculation at T.C.D.—His Reputation there—The Berkeley Gold Medal—The Classical Scholarship—His Marks—Why he left T.C.D.—He goes to Oxford—A Turning-Point in his Life—The Possible Dangers of a Student's Life—His University Achievements—"Not a Reading Man."

THE school which was selected for Oscar Wilde by his parents was a school founded by an English prince, the father of that "Pretender" whom one of the boy's ancestors had helped to overthrow. Possibly it was Speranza's great detestation of the "soulless iconoclast," Cromwell, that prompted her to send her sons to be *alumni* in a house of which King Charles was the founder, patron and benefactor, Portora Royal School, Enniskillen. Motives of economy may also have dictated this choice; for compared with the fees of an English public school, the charges at Portora are very small. There are three terms in the year, and the fees for each boarder—"a considerable reduction being made

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in the case of brothers"—are only £17, 10s. per term. According to the present synopsis of the course of instruction the work of the higher forms is mainly directed towards preparation for the universities, and especially for Trinity College, Dublin. The school is under the government of The Fermanagh Protestant Board of Education, of which the Right Rev. The Lord Bishop of Clogher, D.D., is the Chairman, and amongst the members of which are the Rector of Enniskillen and another Church of England clergyman. It is a sectarian school; for we notice amongst the provisions of the "Course of Instruction" there that: "Religious training is regarded as of supreme importance. The boarders are regularly instructed in Divinity, and on Sundays attend the respective Protestant churches in charge of responsible masters." From what precedes it is easy to imagine the bias with which English and Irish history must have been taught in this school, what Whiggish principles must have been instilled hour by hour into the pupils' minds, and what the prevailing opinion among Oscar's pastors and masters on Irish Nationalism, and the doings of the Young Ireland Party may have been. For instance, one may fancy the views of the Lord Bishop of Clogher, D.D.,



OSCAR WILDE AS A YOUNG MAN. (FROM A RED CHALK DRAWING.)

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on "The Glorious young Meagher." At first bewilderment must have come to the lad, who had been trained to admire his mother for the part she had taken in a movement which to the Right Rev. the Lord Bishop and the rest of The Fermanagh Protestant Board of Education must have appeared in much the same light as did to the Lord Archbishop of Munster the proceedings of John of Leyden and the other Anabaptists in 1536. Bewilderment would give place to an insight into the insincerity of most political professions, and from this to cynicism and general disbelief would be but one step. "If the gods of our faith be liars, in whom shall we trust?"

Oscar went to this school when he was eleven years old. Lady Wilde's description of him as a wonderful boy who could do anything seems to have been justified by his early achievements at Portora. In 1868 he was already very high up in the school; he had, indeed, already reached the third class in his first year. It is recorded of him that he got "quicker into a book than any boy that ever lived." At the same time he was a great dunce in the mathematical class. He has been described by a schoolfellow of his, who is now a most distinguished man, as "absolutely incapable of mathematics." In

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arithmetic he was hopelessly bad, and, as by the regulations of the school a certain proficiency in arithmetic was an indispensable qualification for the winning of certain prizes for scholarship, it was a usual thing to see young Oscar Wilde, on the eve of entering some examination, being coached in the elements of mathematical science by one of the junior masters. This early incapacity for figures explains much of the recklessness of his after life. The careful and parsimonious of this world are by instinct mathematicians, at least as far as the four great rules are concerned. It is recorded of most spendthrifts, on the other hand, that the faculty of calculation is an element lacking in their mental composition. Has the world's history any record of an extravagant mathematician ?

Oscar Wilde was a big boy, very tall for his age, and distinctly heavy of build. One of his schoolfellows says that "he used to flop about ponderously." He was not popular with the other boys. For one thing, he never played any games. In later life he used to say that he objected to cricket because the attitudes assumed were so indecent. He never rowed on the lake ; and he had for the musketry instructor and the drill sergeant contempt mingled with pity. His manner was very reserved, and he

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used to keep aloof from the other boys. Another characteristic which made for his unpopularity amongst his schoolfellows, just as in later life it raised up against him so many implacable enemies, was the extraordinary gift he had of saying trenchant things about others. He was a very clever boy at giving nicknames. He was the ironical sponsor to the whole school from the Rev. William Steele, D.D., the headmaster, down to the smallest boy in class 1b. As a man, few wits have ever said cleverer, and at the same time more biting things about their contemporaries. This capacity of his and his ruthless exercise thereof account for much of the hatred that is still alive against him years after his lonely death. Of one very famous contemporary Irish writer he remarked: "He has no enemies, but he is intensely disliked by his friends." Of the son of a famous pianist he once said, when the fact of this parentage was stated to him: "Well, I am glad that he has managed to survive it." Of an extraordinary Russian Jew who at various times essayed to fill in modern London the rôle of a Maecenas, a Heliogabalus, and other less worthy parts, and who hated Oscar Wilde with an intensity of hatred that almost made him interesting, he declared: "He came to London

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in the hopes of founding a salon. He has succeeded only in opening a restaurant." He used to use this man's name as the symbol of ugliness. "As ugly as ——" was an expression constantly in his mouth. He described him as a "foetus in a bottle." In "Intentions" one finds many compliments, *à rebours*, addressed to various of the prominent writers of the time. We are told that Hall Caine writes at the top of his voice; that Rudyard Kipling reveals life "by splendid flashes of vulgarity"; that as one turns over the pages of one of James Payn's novels, "the suspense of the author becomes quite unbearable"; that Henry James writes fiction as if it were a painful duty; and that Marion Crawford has immolated himself on the altar of local colour. These remarks are all very clever, but they are not gratifying to the people about whom they were made, and would not tend to increase the satirist's number of friends. But Oscar Wilde seemed to go out of his way to offend people, not individuals alone, but whole sections of society. What solicitor, for instance, being present at the performance of his comedy, "The Importance of Being Earnest," and hearing his sneer at the social standing of the profession, as it was put into Lady Bracknell's mouth, but would feel a personal

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grievance against the author for a gratuitous slight? These are the words referred to:

“*Lady Bracknell*: — Markby, Markby & Markby? A firm of the very highest position in their profession. Indeed, I am told that one of the Mr Markbys is occasionally to be seen at dinner-parties.”

Elsewhere every stockbroker gets an unnecessary wound to his self-esteem. Indeed, few of the professions escape the lash of satire which seems prompted merely by the contempt of a man professing to voice aristocratic and elegant society, and its alleged disdain for men and women who have to work for a living. He carried his imprudence to the extent of insulting journalists with tedious insistence, thus fouling the very trumpets of modern reputation. There are many points in Oscar Wilde's career which allow of a comparison between him and the great Napoleon; and this deliberate delight in provoking enmities, this sheer reckless and uncharitable combativeness, is not the least striking characteristic common to both. In both men it arose from a delusion as to the extent of their powers, from a spirit of prepotence, from a most imprudent contempt of the aggregate force of the individual adversaries whom they so joyfully and so wilfully raised

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up against themselves. This policy of mischief did not succeed in the hands of Napoleon ; it was therefore not likely to be more successful in the hands of Oscar Wilde. The latter was fond of reading the "Maximes" of the Duc de la Rochefoucault, and might have remembered to his advantage that the epigrammatist said that the man who thinks that he can do without society makes a mistake, but that the man who thinks that society cannot do without him makes a still greater mistake.

Although he is remembered at Portora as having been very clever in giving nicknames to others, none of his schoolfellows can recall what was his own particular soubriquet. He seems to have been generally known as "Oscar." As to his brother, Willy, he was known as "Blue-Blood." He was not a tidy boy ; he had inherited some of the paternal carelessness about his appearance, and having one day been remonstrated with for the umber of his neck and hands, declared very proudly that his skin was dark, not because it was dirty, but because of the blue blood in the veins of the Wildes. This anecdote might have been left unrecorded, but for the fact that it shows that the Wilde boys held a high opinion of their social standing, and may explain Oscar's subsequent determined

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efforts to establish himself in London society, as also his contempt, referred to above, for people whose blood was not blue, and who had to work for their maintenance. And here it may once more be repeated that the exigencies of this biography make it impossible to discard any fact, on which friendship or reverence might plead for silence, when that fact can serve to throw light upon the complex problem of the character which we are engaged in studying.

Already in those days young Oscar Wilde showed that fondness for distinguished attire which ever marked him in life. He is remembered at Portora as the only boy there who used to wear a top hat. "It was always a very fashionable hat, of the latest style." All the boys at Portora were provided, by school regulations as to the outfit, with one Black Silk Hat, but this was for Sunday wear only. Oscar never discarded his. He was always very well dressed, and wore his hair long. "He had a good wisp of hair!" is said of him still in Enniskillen. He did not appear to be very friendly with his brother Willy. "He was very superior in his manner towards Willy." The latter was much more popular with the boys. The little boys at Portora, especially, had the greatest affection for Willy Wilde. Even in

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those early days he had all the charming *talents de société* which afterwards won him much success. He used to tell stories to the children, and he used to play the piano for them.

Oscar was considered exceedingly clever in literature—that is to say in his knowledge of books. At the same time the future author of “Intentions” never showed any superiority in composition. “He never stood out in essays,” remarks one of his masters, who adds: “Oscar Wilde was never looked upon as a formidable competitor by the boys who went in for examinations in Portora school.” His conduct was uniformly good. There was not a breath of a complaint about him in any way, except some short time before he left the school, when, as one of his schoolfellows relates, “he got into an awful row with the headmaster. He had cheeked old Steele something awful.” That there was nothing of the decadent about Oscar Wilde in his school-days is the unanimous declaration of many men who were boys at school with him. He was a great reader, and assimilated what he read in a remarkable manner. He used to get through a book with a speed that astonished everybody; and what he had read thus rapidly, he used to remember. He read nothing but English books, and these

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were generally classical novels. He displayed no particular efficiency in French in those days. He had a great fondness for handsome books and choice editions. "When he came so prominently before the world as an æsthete," relates a Don at T.C.D., "we all tried to remember any indication that he had given as a lad of a taste for beautiful things, and the only thing that we could recall in this connection was that he always had most expensive copies of class-books. He had, for instance, a beautiful large paper edition of Æschylus." During his last year at Portora, when he was a lad of sixteen, his eager thirst for knowledge and his great receptivity were matters of observation and comment. Often when Mr Purser was instructing the class in history or in geography Oscar Wilde would contrive by means of some cleverly put question to lead the master into a disquisition on some topic on which he desired to gain information. The subject in hand would be forgotten; the master, ever prompted by his pupil, would unbosom himself of his store of learning. Sometimes the whole of the hour would be thus absorbed. At other times the master would bring the discussion back to the subject of the lesson, and then it was a sight to see the lad, all alert, thinking and planning

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how, next day, he could turn the master once more on to the question in which he needed instruction—questions often as obtruse as the relative definitions of nominalism and realism.

In arithmetic he made no progress at all while at school, and many boys remember the efforts which Mr Purser used to make to cram him with the elementary rules.

It was, perhaps, in the competition for the Gold Medal which is the great distinction at Portora that Oscar Wilde displayed his peculiar capacity for mastering the contents of a classical book. "In the *viva voce*," says one of his competitors, "which was on the Agamemnon of Æschylus, he simply walked away from us all." He gained 25 per cent. higher marks in this examination than the nearest to him.

In October 1871 Oscar Wilde matriculated at Trinity College, Dublin. In the matriculation examination where he obtained the second place his marks in the various subjects were as follows: (The maxim number of marks obtainable in each subject was 10.)

Greek, Two Papers—8, 8.

Latin, Two Papers—8, 7.

Latin Composition—4.

English Composition—5.

History—8.

Arithmetic—2.

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His total was thus 50. The total obtained by another Portora boy, the gentleman who is now the Junior Bursar of Trinity College, and who ranks as one of the most distinguished classical scholars in the country, was 65. On the second day of the examination, where the subjects were the Higher Classics, Oscar Wilde obtained 46 marks; whilst the boy who had so outstripped him on the previous day in the rudiments only obtained 36 marks. Oscar Wilde's neglect of the rudiments was always a feature of his character.

He is registered on the matriculation book of Trinity College in the following terms and under the headings given:—

MATRICULATION ENTRY

	<i>Johannes Malet</i>	<i>Praelector Primarius</i>		
<i>Dies Mensis</i>	<i>Admissorum Nomina</i>	<i>Qualitates</i>	<i>Fidei Professiones</i>	
Oct. 10	Oscar Wilde	P.	I. C.	
<i>Patres</i>	<i>Patrum Qualitates</i>	<i>Nativitatum Loca</i>	<i>Aetatis Anni</i>	
Wm.	,Physician	Dublin	16	

He was at that time just within six days of his seventeenth birthday. At this time of his life, therefore, Oscar Wilde displayed side by side, with a brilliant capacity for reading and understanding the classics, a not quite first-rate knowledge of the elements of classical knowledge. He was undistinguished in Latin composition, which exacts this mastery of the rudiments,

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mediocre in English composition, and unsatisfactory in arithmetic. It is related of Emile Zola, it may be remembered, that he was rejected at his examination for the baccalaureat degree for inefficiency in composition.

During his year's attendance at Trinity College, Dublin, his conduct was irreproachable. "He left this College," says one of the Dons who was a fellow-student of his, "with the very highest character." Beyond the foolish remark of his, that invitation of a fellow-undergraduate to come to his father's house, which has been quoted above, not a single thing is remembered against him. It was for this reason, no doubt, that no official cognisance was taken by Trinity College, Dublin, of his public disgrace; his name was not deleted on any of the honourable records on which his capacity, excellence and industry had inscribed it. At Portora Royal College, on the other hand, a resolution was taken by The Fermanagh Protestant Board of Education in virtue of which the inscription of honour of his name on the stone tablets of the schoolhouse would have been erased, when, *mirabile dictu*, it transpired that outraged Nature herself had forestalled The Fermanagh Protestant Board of Education in the execution of this salutary sacrifice. The slab on which

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Oscar Wilde's name was inscribed in letters of gold had cracked right across the ill-reputed words: Nature had effaced the name. In a less enlightened place, amongst the ignorant and superstitious Irish who are not Protestants, the circumstance might have been hailed as a miracle.

He was considered a highly gifted, amiable young man, likely to win a high place as a scholar. In the various college examinations he continually distinguished himself. He was first out of fourteen in the First Rank in the Michaelmas Prize Examination 1872; in Hilary Term he was third of the First Rank. The gentleman, now a Privy Councillor, who was Solicitor General under the last Tory Administration, was an undergraduate of the same standing as Oscar Wilde, and with the other junior freshman, competed in the same examinations. He did not, however, emerge from the Second Rank. In later life these two men were to be once more in fierce competition, the fiercest competition, perhaps, that has ever been waged in the Old Bailey Court between a witness for the prosecution and a counsel for the defence; and here too Oscar Wilde was to hold the superior rank. It has been stated that the barrister has admitted that until towards the very end of his cross-

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examination of the prosecutor he felt that he had had the worst of it all along. He was just about to sit down when an answer of fatal insolence and folly brought the whole of Wilde's splendid defence of himself crumbling to the ground, gave an opening to his more patient adversary, and exposed him to devastation and ruin. This cross-examination of Oscar Wilde in the Queensberry trial is still eagerly studied by advocates as a lesson how a barrister should act when brought face to face with a hostile witness of such consummate readiness, power and nerve. The barrister's triumph in this case was a complete one; but the reason for that was rather because the witness had become intoxicated with his own triumph throughout, lost his head in consequence of this, and in an imprudent moment destroyed the whole effect of his previous answers. The report teaches what patience can do, and a knowledge of the rudiments; and in that sense is a triumph for the counsel. He might well have lost his head. He did not. He waited and watched, and in the words of a barrister who was sitting in court at his side, "pounced like a hawk," upon the witness when the long-awaited-for opportunity arose.

Amongst certain men, prominent at Trinity

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College, Oscar Wilde was held "an average sort of man," and surprise was expressed when he came to the front. Such surprise can only have proceeded from that innocency and ignorance of the things of this world which are the most beautiful traits in the character of the deeply learned. Success in the world, the acclaim of the populace do not go to the modest and retiring scholar. It is an age of advertisement, and even the greatest talents must conform to the commercial exigencies of the hour. One may see any day in any of the big public libraries, the shabby, hungered, half-blinded man of great learning and knowledge elbowed by the secretary of some popular novelist who is collecting facts for his master. The secretary is well-dressed, well-fed, and shines with the reflected light of his employer, who, very probably, earns in one hour more than the great scholar can gain in a week of laborious days and nights.

In a letter written by Lady Wilde to Mr O'Donoghue she begs him not to omit to mention in writing a biographical notice of her that both her sons were Gold Medallists, "a distinction," she said, "of which they are both very proud." Oscar's gold medal was the Berkeley Medal. This prize was founded by

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the famous Bishop Berkeley, who denied the existence of matter, and of whom Lord Byron wrote that when he said that there was no matter it really was no matter what he said. It was possibly from a desire to be consistent with his principles that the Bishop left so small a sum for the purpose of this prize that the Berkeley Gold Medal is not materially one of much value. As a distinction, however, it is highly prized. The subject in which candidates were examined in 1874 was "The Fragments of the Greek Comic Poets, as edited by Meineke," and the prize was won by Oscar Wilde. It will illustrate to what financial straits the poor man was put even at a time when his name was in everybody's mouth, that in 1883 after his successful visit to Paris, and while he was lecturing all over England, he was obliged to go to the magistrate at Marlborough Police Court to make a statutory declaration concerning the loss of a pawn-ticket which was the voucher for Bishop Berkeley's gold medal.

In the books of Trinity College there is no record of the marks earned by the various competitors who entered for the Berkeley Prize in 1874. The mere fact that this was won by Oscar Wilde is registered in the records of the college. With regard, however, to the scholar-

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ship which Oscar Wilde had won in the previous year full particulars of his various markings are to be found. They are of some interest, as illustrating the state of his mental capacity in the different subjects in which the candidates were examined.

Oscar Wilde's marks in the various subjects were the following. In each case 10 was the maximum number of marks obtainable.

Viva Voce Thucydides—8.

Viva Voce Tacitus—7½.

Greek Prose Composition—5. (The examiner in this subject was Mr Stack, "a notoriously hard marker." The best marks given were 6½, which were obtained by Joseph King, who, however, only got the last place but one among the selected candidates. He was ninth, while Oscar Wilde was sixth.)

Greek Translation—7. (This was the best mark given.)

Greek Tragedians (Questions on)—7.

Latin Comedians (Questions on)—7.

Latin Prose Translation on Paper—6.

Latin Prose Composition—3½.

Demosthenes—5.

Ancient History—7.

Greek Verse (Passages on Paper)—5.

Greek Verse Composition.—I. (Here Mr Wm. Roberts was the examiner. He was a "character as a 'Varsity Don," a very hard examiner. In this subject most of the candidates scored no better than Oscar Wilde, some got no marks at all, a plump duck's egg figures against their names in the Trinity record. One or two got two marks. Messrs Montgomery and L. C. Purser, who were first and second in the final classification, each got five marks.)

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Greek Viva Voce (Mr Tyrell, examiner)—6.

Latin Viva Voce (Mr Tyrell, examiner)—5½.

Translation from Latin Poets—4.

English Composition—6. (This was the highest number of marks scored in this subject by any of the candidates.)

Latin and Greek Grammar—4.

In the final result Oscar Wilde got the sixth place out of ten selected candidates. Joseph King, who was considered the cleverest man in the college was placed ninth. The following is the complete list of selected candidates in their order of merit.

MALCOLM MONTGOMERY.

LOUIS CLAUDE PURSER.

RICHARD HENNESSY.

THOMAS CORR.

GODDARD HENRY ORPEN.

OSCAR WILDE.

WILLIAM RIDGEWAY.

GEORGE THOMAS VANSTON.

JOSEPH KING.

ARTHUR M'HUGH.

An examination of the marks obtained by Oscar Wilde sets forth that while still weak in the rudiments he had made great progress in English composition. He was to make still greater progress in the event.

The Trinity College Scholarships, like the Gold Medal, lack in that materialism which the Bishop denied. They carry with them no great

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emolument. A T.C.D. scholar obtains rooms in college at half the usual fees charged to students. He has no fees to pay for tuition, and he gets his dinners for nothing. But there is no income attached to the position. "Oscar Wilde never held his scholarship at Trinity College," one learns, "as he preferred to go to Oxford, where better things are to be won."

In the following year, accordingly, he went to Oxford, won a demyship at Magdalen College, of the annual value of £95, tenable for five years, and matriculated at Magdalen on 17th October.

He writes in "De Profundis" of his entrance into the English University, as the great turning-point of his life.

"I want to get to the point," he writes, "when I shall be able to say quite simply, and without affectation, that the two great turning-points in my life were when my father sent me to Oxford, and when society sent me to prison."

It is possible that when he wrote those lines he was thinking that if he had never been sent to Oxford, the extraordinary latent madness which had brought him to the terrible place where he sat, might never have been roused into fatal activity. For there is no use denying it: Oxford, which is the finest school in the world for the highest culture, is also the worst training-

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ground for the lowest forms of debauchery. It all depends on the character of the student, his early home-training, his natural propensities, his physical state, his religious belief. Oxford produces side by side the saint, the sage, and the depraved libertine. She sends men to Parnassus or to the public-house, to Latium or the lenocinium. The Dons ignore the horrors which are going on under their very eyes. They are wrapped up in the petty concerns of the University hierarchy; they are of ~~men~~ the most unpractical and least worldly; while possibly their deep classical studies have so familiarised them with certain pathological manifestations that they really fail to understand the horror of much that is the common jest of the undergraduates. Oxford has rendered incalculable services to the Empire, but she has also fostered and sent forth great numbers of men who have contributed to poison English society. It is very possible that if Sir William Wilde had not sent his second son to Oxford, but had left him in Ireland, where certain forms of ~~perversion~~ are totally unknown, and where vice generally is regarded with a universal horror which contrasts most strongly with the mischievous tolerances that English society manifests towards it, Oscar would now be living in Dublin, one of the lights

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of Trinity College, one of the glories of Ireland, a scholar and a gentleman of universal reputation. Let any Oxford man who remembers his undergraduates days, who remembers the things that used to be jested about there, and the common talk at the wines about this man or that, ask himself when he has condemned Oscar Wilde whether *alma mater* may not have been to blame, in part if not *in toto*, for the tremendous and terrible metamorphosis that was worked in Oscar Wilde's character, admitting that the young man, who left Trinity College with a spotless reputation, really did develop in so short a time into the dangerous maniac such as he afterwards came to be considered. The man who approaches the study of this extraordinary degeneration of character (admitting the common aspect of the Oscar Wilde of later years to be justified) in a scientific spirit and without bias, cannot fail to feel the gravest suspicion that Oscar Wilde was to a very large extent a victim of the Oxford educational system, of the Oxford environment. To the same dangers as those to which he succumbed any impressionable lad is exposed, who, starting with no strong moral sense, his native virtue weakened by evil example at home, is immersed in a year-long course of study, in which in the finest language

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that the world has ever voiced men and women are glorified who in the present day would be considered monsters fit only for the stake, and where in almost divine poetry are celebrated passions and acts which society and the church now point to as the very abomination of desolation. In a pathetic letter which Oscar Wilde wrote to a friend of his after his release from prison he said : " I have still difficulty in understanding why the frequentation of Sporus should be considered so much more criminal than the frequentation of Messalina." It is, moreover, a well-established pathological fact that the men in whom certain aberrations develop with the most hideous fecundity are men of great scholarship whose moral sense has been warped by studies in which they have come to identify their environment with that of the men and women of antiquity.

In scholarship Oscar Wilde progressed with surprising rapidity. His career as a student was a most successful one. He took a First Class in Moderations in the Honours School (Trinity Term 1876), and two year later, in Trinity Term 1878, he took a First Class in the " Honour Finals." Yet he was never a reading man, and was rarely to be seen at his books.

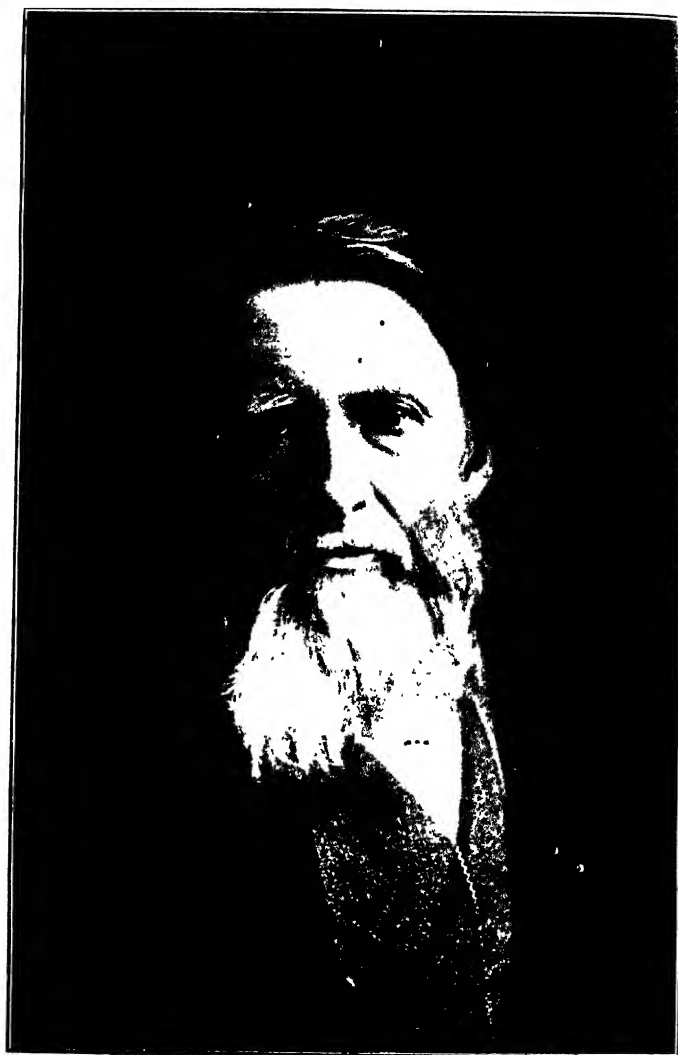


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CHAPTER VII

Oscar Wilde at Oxford—John Ruskin—The Extent of his Influence on Oscar Wilde—Ruskin's Socialism—Oscar Wilde as a Social Reformer—His Immense Influence Abroad—Oscar as an Undergraduate—His Rooms at Magdalen—His Appearance—He is "Ragged"—His Physical and Moral Courage—His Leanings to Catholicism—His Journey in Greece—The Effect upon him—Early Writings in Prose and Verse—"Ravenna"—The Irony of Fate—"Ravenna" Symbolical of his own Career.

DURING some part of Oscar Wilde's first term at Oxford—that is to say, during one month in Michaelmas Term 1874—John Ruskin, Slade Professor of Fine Arts, was lecturing twice a week in the Oxford Museum on the "Æsthetic and Mathematic schools of Art in Florence." This was the second course of lectures delivered by Ruskin during that term, and this course was divided into eight lectures, classified under three separate titles. The first three lectures (Series A) dealt with (1) Arnolfo, (2) Cimabue, (3) Giotto. This series described the "Æsthetic Schools of 1300." The next series of three lectures (Series B), treated of the "Mathematic Schools of 1400," and the various lectures expounded, (4) Brunelleschi, the architect of the

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Pitti Palace in Florence, (5) Quercia, and (6) Ghiberti. The "Final Efforts of Æsthetic Art in Florence" formed the subject of the two concluding lectures (Series C), and these treated of (7) Angelico, and (8) Botticelli.

Oscar Wilde was a constant attendant at these lectures, and there can be no doubt that they produced a very strong impression on his mind, as, indeed, Ruskin's discourses did on every man who heard them. They must have opened up a new field of interest to the young Irishman, have afforded him new subjects on which to talk, and have suggested to him, by the spectacle of the great enthusiasm which Mr Ruskin aroused, the opportunism of a minor apostolate in a creed so obviously popular and successful. But there does not appear to be any grounds for saying, as has so often been said, that Oscar Wilde was greatly influenced by Mr Ruskin. It was not probable that this would be so seeing that the whole period of Ruskin's public appearances that term did not exceed twenty-four days, and that in that period it is not possible for one man to influence another to the extent of tinging his whole psychology. Oscar Wilde was a man of extraordinary receptivity, but even to him it would have been impossible to absorb Ruskin's teachings and example so that these should

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have any permanent effect on his character, in so short a period. At that time he was fresh at Oxford ; a hundred things presented themselves every day to divert his attention ; his mentality was in no way prepared to receive the master's teachings ; and altogether it seems as absurd to state that Ruskin influenced the whole of his character and his life by means of the eight lectures which Oscar Wilde attended as a freshman during his first term in Oxford, as it was incredible that the perusal of a single book could pervert the mental composition of a man. These matters have to be looked at from a scientific point of view ; the plain facts have to be considered and the evidence that can be adduced. There is no trace of any Ruskin influence in Oscar Wilde's after life, and it would be a psychological miracle if there had been.

It is true that the young man was brought into personal contact with the master, and that he was one of the " ardent young men " who gathered round Mr Ruskin in his practical demonstrations of the Gospel of Labour. In one of the notices of Oscar Wilde's early life we find the following reference to this : " The influence of Ruskin was so great that Mr Wilde, though holding games in abomination, and detesting violent exercise, might have been seen

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on grey November mornings breaking stones on the roadsides—not unbribed, however; ‘he had the honour of filling Mr Ruskin’s especial wheelbarrow,’ and it was the great author of ‘Modern Painters’ himself who taught him how to trundle it.”

Mr E. T. Cook in his very able monograph, “Some Aspects of Mr Ruskin’s Work,” which is one part of his “Studies in Ruskin,” gives the following account of the “road-digging experiment,” referred to above. “No professor, I suppose, has had more power of personal influence over his pupils, or has used it more for good, than Mr Ruskin. One of the methods which he adopted for gathering a circle of ardent young men around him, and impregnating them with his spirit, was the subject of much sarcastic comment. This was the famous road-digging experiment. No one was more alive to the amusing side of the affair than Mr Ruskin himself. The road which his pupils made is, he has been heard to admit, about the worst in the three kingdoms, and for any level places in it he gives the credit to his gardener, whom he incontinently summoned from Brantwood. Nevertheless the experiment, even from the point of view of road-making, was by no means barren. An inch of practice is worth a yard of

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preaching ; and Mr Ruskin's road-digging at Hincksey gave a powerful stimulus to the Gospel of Labour, of the same kind as the later and independent stimulus of Count Tolstoi ; of whom Mr Ruskin has spoken gratefully in recent years as his successor. But the fact is that most of the Oxford road-diggers were attracted to the work, not for its own sake, but for the reward of it—the reward of the subsequent breakfast-party and informal talks in Mr Ruskin's rooms at Corpus. It was in Mr Ruskin's Oxford Lectures and these supplementary enforcements of their teaching that the seeds were sown or watered, of that practical interest in social questions which is the 'Oxford movement of to-day.' ”

It would be an insult to the lofty intellect of Oscar Wilde, immature as he then was, receptive as he always was, to suppose that the socialism of Mr Ruskin, that Tolstoism *d'avant la lettre*, which enangers and disgusts every true reformer, had any influence upon him whatever, and that the author of that magnificent *plaidoyer*, “The Soul of Man Under Socialism,” did not fully realise the grotesqueness of these *bourgeois* buffooneries. One has the highest respect for Mr Ruskin ; but what opinion is likely to be held by anyone who knows the real condition of the

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poor in the three kingdoms of England, Scotland, and Ireland who is invited to admire the Slade Professor of Fine Art haranguing in the following terms an audience of young bourgeois and aristocrats, greasy and replete with unctuous breakfast, clad in warm clothing, opulent and perky :—" I tell you that neither sound art, policy, nor religion can exist in England until, neglecting, if it must be, your own pleasure-gardens and pleasure-chambers, you resolve that the streets which are the habitation of the poor, and the fields which are the playgrounds of their children, shall be again restored to the rule of the spirits whosoever they are in earth and heaven, that ordain and reward, with constant and conscious felicity, all that is decent and orderly, beautiful and pure." This is the kind of talk that gets Social Reformers into Whig Cabinets and raises statues to them by subscription of the middle classes. It does not deceive the people for a single moment, and it does not for a single moment deceive those who instinctively or by long observation understand the wants of the people and know what wrongs of theirs ought to be redressed. It would not deceive Oscar Wilde, who intuitively rather than by observation, for he recoiled from any sights that might distress his æsthetic

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taste, so fully understood the problem of the poor. It is among some of his friends an abiding regret that he was not spared a few years longer, so that in the depth of his despair he might have seen the wonderful triumph that Germany has prepared for him, might have watched the crowds flocking to the theatre to see "Salomé" played, might have listened to the frantic enthusiasm which this play never fails to evoke, might a little later on have realised that it had been given to him by this play to stimulate to the highest expression of his wonderful art the composer Richard Strauss, whom the *cognoscenti* hail as the greatest *maestro* who ever lived. Amongst other of his friends the regret will be greater that it never came to his knowledge that all over Europe amongst the poor, oppressed and outcast, his name is revered as that of an apostle of the liberties of man. No writing on the social question, perhaps, has produced a profounder impression than his on the continent, where "The Soul of Man" has been translated into every tongue. Amongst the very poorest and most forlorn, and most desperate of the helots of Europe, the Jews of Russia and Poland, Oscar Wilde, known to them only as the author of this essay, is regarded in the light of a prophet, a benefactor, a

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saint. In many of the awful kennels in Warsaw and Lublin, in Kieff and Libau his portrait is pinned to the wall. Such is the interest taken in him that recently, his friend, the author of "Oscar Wilde," "The Story of an Unhappy Friendship," received from a Jewish gentleman living in the East End of London a request that he should furnish his correspondent with biographical details about Oscar Wilde, to be prefixed in form of a preface to a new edition of the Yiddish translation of "The Soul of Man," such particulars having been eagerly asked for from the Jewish proletariat all over Poland and Russia.

Mr Ruskin left for Venice at the end of Michaelmas Term 1874, and did not return to Oxford till a year later, when he delivered a series of twelve lectures on "The Discourses of Sir Joshua Reynolds," during the month of November. During 1876 he did not lecture at all, and it was not till Michaelmas 1877 that he was seen again as Slade Professor of Fine Art. Under the circumstances it is nonsense to assert that his influence on Oscar Wilde extended any further than what is indicated in Walter Hamilton's most interesting book, "The Æsthetic Movement in England," in the chapter which treats of Oscar Wilde.

"But unfortunately," he writes, "Mr Ruskin

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left for Venice at the end of Mr Wilde's first term; not, however, before he had inoculated a number of the young collegians with artistic tastes. Mr Wilde occupied some fine old wainscoted rooms over the river in that college which is thought by many to be the most beautiful in Oxford. These rooms he had decorated with painted ceilings and handsome dados, and they were filled with treasures of art picked up at home and abroad; and here he held social meetings, which were attended by numbers of the men who were interested in art, or music, or poetry, and who for the most part practised some one of these in addition to the ordinary collegiate studies."

It was at this time, therefore, that a rôle was forced upon the young man, which he had no natural qualifications to play; it was here that the curtain rose on that tragi-comedy in which his fine intellect was to lend itself to grotesque performances until, just before a period was put to his existence, he really found himself. It was from these reunions in Magdalen that dated that virtuosity in music and painting and the decorative arts which he was forced to assume by the hazards of life, his own necessities and the folly of his contemporaries. He knew little about music, and little about

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painting, and in the matter of furniture, tapestries, wall-papers and architecture he was no more of a *connoisseur* than is any man who can assimilate the current modes and the chatter of the arbiters. During a long period of his life this pose which had been forced upon him must have galled his native rectitude. Face to face with himself he must have felt that it was an unworthy part for a man of his great intellect and wonderful gifts to play. Perhaps it was from this feeling that in some respects he was playing a double-faced rôle that proceeded that curious self-accusing manner, which all his intimates noticed in him, and which filled them with astonishment. It is a fact that music bored him ; it is a fact that he had no knowledge of any instrument ; it is probable that he could with difficulty distinguish one tune from another. Yet he was forced to posture as a *connoisseur*, and to speak and write about musicians and music with the air of one who was profoundly versed in all the technique of the art. A friend of his relates that the rare occasion on which he saw Oscar Wilde angry, with him was once when he had frequently repeated in his presence a phrase from one of Oscar's essays, a phrase which had struck him by its effectiveness so that he had the pleasure



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in repeating it that actors have in mouthing a "gag" which has caught the popular ear. This phrase was: "a splendid scarlet thing by Dvorak." At the third repetition of these words, Oscar Wilde flew into a veritable passion and rebuked the friend for wishing to ridicule him. It has always been held by the man who relates this story that Oscar's anger was caused by the suspicion that his friend knew that his claim to write about Dvorak or any other composer was a mere pretence, and that he cleverly veiled his ignorance by the use of sonorous and effective phrases.

Mr Hamilton quotes the following passage as given by "one who was acquainted with Mr Wilde at Oxford" as descriptive of his life there:

"He soon began to show his taste for art and china, and before he had been at Oxford very long, his rooms were quite the show ones of the college and of the university too. He was fortunate enough to obtain the best situated rooms in the college, on what is called the kitchen staircase, having a lovely view over the river Cherwell and the beautiful Magdalen walks, and Magdalen bridge. His rooms were three in number, and the walls were entirely panelled. The two sitting-rooms were connected by an arch, where folding doors had at one

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time stood. His blue china was supposed by *connoisseurs* to be very valuable and fine, and there was plenty of it. The panelled walls were thickly hung with old engravings—chiefly engravings of the fair sex artistically clad as nature clad them. He was hospitable, and on Sunday nights after “Common Room” his rooms were generally the scene of conviviality, where undergraduates of all descriptions and tastes were to be met, drinking punch, or a “B. and S.,” with their cigars. It was at one of these entertainments that he made his well-known remark, “Oh, would that I could live up to my blue china!” His chief amusement was riding, though he never used to hunt. He was generally to be met on the cricket-field, but never played himself; and he was a regular attendant at his college barge to see the May eight-oar races, but he never used to trust his massive form to a boat himself.”

At this time he had not yet adopted those eccentricities of costume which a few years later attracted universal attention to his person. The portraits which exist of him as an undergraduate of Oxford represent him comfortably and soberly attired in a tweed suit, a flannel shirt, with a tie unassumingly gathered into a knot under his turn-down collar. In the winter he used to wear an ordinary grey ulster. His hair which

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was brushed back from his forehead was not too long. The best known photograph of Oscar Wilde at this period—that is to say in 1878—is the “amateurish and therefore faithful” picture of him taken by a man who was then a well-known character in Oxford, whose name was Guggenheim. This man used to be known as “Gug” by the undergraduates. He was a kind of Hans Breitmann, a typical stage-German, with tasselled smoking-cap, carpet slippers, and a long-stemmed china pipe. His studio was in the “High,” and he had a reputation for taking “College groups” in an effective manner.

Oscar Wilde attempted while an undergraduate to render himself proficient in painting, but nothing that he ever painted has survived. There is a story that for a period during vacation he studied art in Paris; and it is remembered at Oxford that being once asked by a Magdalen celebrity, as a joke, what he would do if his means suddenly failed him and if he were to be thrown on his own resources, he answered: “I should live in a garret and paint beautiful pictures.” However, no one at Oxford, who knew him in those days, can remember seeing him paint, and a suspicion existed that he could not paint at all, and that his remark was only the outcome of the deception which he had resolved to prac-

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tise. It is quite probable, though, that he may have attempted painting, and being dissatisfied with his progress preferred to "talk pictures" instead of painting them. *Il passa sa vie à se parler*, and not with reference to pictures alone.

Not in his dress, therefore, at that time, but in his conversation and manners rather did he assume that "dangerous and delightful distinction of being different from others," of which he writes in his remarkable essay on Thomas Griffiths Wainewright ("Pen, Pencil, and Poison," in "Intentions"). Yet, such as it was, his affectation irritated the undergraduates, and on one occasion, at least, they manifested their displeasure with the brutality which these over-fed young men sometimes display. Oscar was once "ragged" at Oxford. Some eight healthy young Philistines waylaid the "blue china cove" while out walking, fell upon him, bound him with cords and dragged him up a hill, trailing him along the ground. He was much hurt and bruised, but he did not resist, for that was useless; nor did he protest with a single word. When at last they released him at the top of the hill he simply flicked the dust off his coat with the air of a Regency beau flipping the grains from his *tabatière* off his lace *jabot*, and looking at the prospect said: "Yes; the view

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from this hill is really very charming." Courage was not wanting to him, either physical or moral. Indeed very few men have displayed either quality in a more remarkable degree. During the period that he was out on bail between his first and second trials his moral courage surprised and impressed all who beheld him. He refused to avoid the impending danger by flight ; with heroism he faced the awful prospect that lay before him. With regard to physical courage it is on record that while a young man in London he assisted a man, a friend, to escape from the police, and in the furtherance of this object exerted great physical strength, holding a door against a number of constables, while the fugitive was clambering out of the window to safety and freedom. In Paris he once expressed his desire to learn the use of the rapier so that he might be able to impose silence at the point of the sword on the slanderers who were attacking his reputation. The fact is that Oscar Wilde was really a man of action. In this respect he resembles many great Irishmen who have found for their energies no other outlet than that of writing. This aspect of Oscar's character is held by certain of his friends who had the opportunity of studying his nature at first hand. In other times and under other circumstances

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he might have been one of the greatest men of action of the world. Possibly the fact that his surroundings did not permit him to give play to this desire for action, but pinned him down to the writing-table, generated not only that indolence and indifference which characterised him, but fostered also that pessimism which in the end killed him. ‘“Cette tristesse et ce comique d’être un homme,” of which Octave Mirbeau speaks, and which make for despair, are felt by none so keenly as by men who, burning to do, are by circumstance condemned to inactivity. The men who banished Napoleon to St Helena could have found in the torture-house of the kings no infliction more cruel.

During his stay in Oxford Oscar Wilde contributed various poems and prose writings to magazines published in Dublin, notably to the T.C.D. publication, *Kottabos*, and *The Irish Monthly*.

His first contribution to *Kottabos* appeared in Vol. ii. (1877) where it may be found on page 268. It is a poem headed :

ΔΗΖΙΘΥΜΟΝ ΕΡΩΤΟΞ ΑΝΘΟΞ

(The Rose of Love and with a Rose's Thorns)

and begins :

“ My limbs are wasted with a flame. . . . ”

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This poem appears under another title in his first volume of collected poems. On page 298 of the same volume of *Kottabos* is to be found a poem, adapted from the Greek, entitled "Threnodia" (Eur. Hec. 444-483), and described as a "song sung by captive women of Troy on the sea-beach at Aulis, while the Achaeans were then storm-bound thro' the wrath of dishonoured Achilles, and waiting for a fair wind to bring them home." The first strophe is as follows:—

"O Fair Wind blowing from the sea !
Who through the dark and mist dost guide
The ships that on the billows ride,
Unto what land, ah, misery !
Shall I be borne, across what stormy wave
Or to whose house a purchased slave !"

This Threnody was very judiciously omitted from his volume of poems. In the same volume we find on page 320, "A fragment from the Agamemnon of Æschylus" ; and on page 331, a poem beginning, "Two crowned Kings." All these poems are signed with his full initials, "O. F. O. F. W. W.," which shows that he had not yet come to regard with disfavour those patronymics which proclaimed his Irish descent and aggressively asserted his nationality. The same signature is found to a poem published on page 56 of the third volume of *Kottabos* (1881),

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entitled "Wasted Days" ("From a Picture Painted by Miss V. T."). This poem is significant, because we find here the first indications that he was assuming a mode of writing about physical qualities which later on was to be brought up in evidence against him. Almost the very words are here employed which were repeated in a letter, the writing of which, after it had been made public, may nearly be said to have precipitated his ruin. This poem begins:

"A fair slim boy not made for this world's pain,
Pale cheeks whereon no kiss has left its stain,
Red underlip drawn in for fear of Love"—

and so on.

It is on page 476 of the fifth volume of *The Irish Monthly* that one of the earliest published prose writings of Oscar Wilde is to be found. This was written in 1877 in Rome. It describes the Tomb of Keats, that Keats who was afterwards to inspire the writer with one of the noblest sonnets in the English language.¹ The short article is headed with a quotation from some guide-book: "As one enters Rome from the Via Ostiensis by the Porta San Paolo the first object that meets the eye is a marble pyramid which stands close at hand on the left."

"This tomb," writes the young Oxonian,

¹ On the sale of the love-letters of Keats.

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“ had been supposed to be that of Remus. It really was that of one Caius Cestius, a Roman gentleman of small note who died about 30 B.C.”

“ Yet,” he continues, “ though we cannot care much for the dead man who lies in lonely state beneath it, and who is only known to the world through his sepulchre, still this pyramid will be ever dear to the eyes of all English-speaking people, because at evening its shadow falls on the tomb of one who walks with Spenser, and Shakespeare, and Byron, and Shelley, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, in the great procession of the sweet singers of England.”

Speaking of the poet's likeness he says in a note :—

“ I think that the best representation of the poet would be a coloured bust, like that of the young Rajah of Koolapoor at Florence, which is a lovely and lifelike work of art.”

He concludes :—

“ As I stood beside the mean grave of this divine boy I thought of him as of a Priest of Beauty slain before his time ; and the vision of Guido's San Sebastian came before my eyes as I saw him at Genoa, a lovely brown boy, with crisp, clustering hair and red lips, bound by his evil enemies to a tree and, though pierced with arrows, raising his eyes with divine, impassioned

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French popular idiom describes as “*chercher midi a quatorze heures*,” to attribute to all kinds of influences the most commonplace acts of the people of whom they treat. Cook & Sons and the other ‘tourists’ agencies take many more people to Italy than ever Ruskin’s lectures will send there. The greatest of men have often the simplest motives for their ordinary acts.

In the same notice we read, what is much more to the point, that “In Florence he became aware of the spiritual element in art, and turned wistfully towards that religion which had inspired the great Italian painters. During this mood he produced some fine poems, notably that entitled ‘Rome Unvisited,’ which won high praise from Cardinal Newman; but the last wave of the ebbing tide of the Tractarian Movement, though it lifted him off his feet, did not carry him away.” It is quite true that at this time of his life he had some desire to join the Church of Rome. If he did not do so it was because his faith was never ardent. In later years it abandoned him altogether. He was a tolerant Agnostic. In “*De Profundis*” he writes :—

“Religion does not help me. The faith that others give to what is unseen I give to what one can touch and look at. My gods dwell in

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temples made with hands. . . . When I think about religion at all I feel as if I would like to found an order for those *who cannot* believe : the Confraternity of the Faithless, one might call it."

Another consideration which may have restrained him was that these reversions to Rome were much too common amongst Oxford undergraduates, and that the suspicion lurked in the minds of worldly men that in many cases they were simply caused by a desire for personal advertisement, a wish to do something different from others, to *épater les contemporains* : various motives which to a man of Oscar Wilde's good taste would appear eminently reprehensible.

Towards the very end of his life he often expressed the wish that he had sought refuge in the arms of the church which the spirit of Calvin does not infect. He is reported to have said more than once that if he had become a Roman Catholic when he was a young man he would never have fallen. He would certainly have suffered less at the hands of his new co-religionaries. Indeed, it is difficult to understand why those who inspire themselves from the teachings of Calvin—that is to say the very large majority of Englishmen and women—and who should therefore accept his doctrine of the predestina-

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tion of man to sin, of the futility of striving against its promptings, should with greater ferocity than any other sect proclaim the entire responsibility of the man who has sinned, and exact from him the uttermost suffering that mortal penance can inflict.

“ Nous tenons,” writes Calvin, “ que le péché originel est une corruption répandue par nos sens et affections en sorte que la droite intelligence et raison est pervertie en nous, et sommes comme pauvres aveugles en ténèbres, et la volonté est sujette à toutes mauvaises cupidités, pleine de rébellion et adonnée au mal ; bref, que nous sommes pauvres captifs détenus sous la tyrannie du péché : non pas qu’en malfaisant nous ne soyons poussés par notre volonté propre, tellement que nous ne saurions rejeter ailleurs la faute de tous nos vices, mais pour ce qu’étant issus de la race maudite d’Adam, nous n’avons pas une seule goutte de vertu à bien faire et toutes nos facultés sont vicieuses.”

It was the last act of friendship of a friend whose devotion to poor Wilde is the one beautiful thing in the terrible spectacle that humanity, afforded in the final tragedy of that man’s life, that on his deathbed Oscar Wilde was baptised into a kindlier creed than the one expounded above. Before the breath had left his body

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pardon had entered into the death chamber ; and to his friends remains the supreme consolation that shrived and sung he was carried to his grave. What would have been his obsequies if this friend had not been by his side at the last ?

In 1877 an event took place in connection with which it may truly be said that “ a new influence entered his life.” This was his journey in Greece with the party which accompanied John Pentland Mahaffy. Of this journey it has been said that it contributed to make a “ healthy Pagan ” of the man who was hesitating whether to join the Church of Rome. Wilde himself declared that the lesson he learned during his travels in Hellas was that it was very right for the Greek gods to be in the Vatican. “ Helen,” he declared, “ took precedence of the *Mater Dolorosa* ; the worship of sorrow gave place again to the worship of beauty.” It is very much to be doubted whether for these fine phrases there was any foundation whatever in fact ; whether the relative claims of Paganism and of Catholic Christianity ever troubled the young traveller’s head at all. The influence to which reference is made above was much simpler and much more important. It was the result that might have been expected when an impres-

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sionable lad, deeply read in classical literature, received visual evidence of the actual existence of the beautiful things of which he had read. For the first time the true call of the Parthenon would reveal itself to his ears. Things which had been in his mind but words, words, words, became tangible and living realities. It was then, no doubt, that for the first time his true enthusiasm for Beauty was aroused. 'It could hardly be otherwise seeing in whose company he was privileged to travel, and who the man was who was at his side to expound to him the marvels that Greece unfolds at every step. The full account of this journey in Greece is given in Professor Mahaffy's wonderful book, "Rambles in Greece," which was one of the favourite books of Monsieur Ernest Renan. Those who are interested in Oscar Wilde should not fail to read this book carefully, for though it bears no reference to his name, every page of it is significant to the man who tries to form a just appreciation of his extraordinary character. It allows one to assert without fear of contradiction that after his return from Greece, his apostolate in the cause of Beauty was no longer dictated by a sense of opportunism. Many writers allude to the wonderful beauty of ancient times, but for the most part their writings have the stamp of

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artificiality. When Oscar speaks of the beauty, for instance, of a Tanagra statuette he knows what he is talking about. In many minds the suspicion lurks that in everything on which he wrote and spoke he was apt to use words which had a fine sound and which conveyed an artistic suggestion so as to create an impression of his knowledge. It has been thought that the catalogues of Museums, the price-lists of jewellers and other artificers lay at his hand when he was writing, so as to enable him to heap up dazzling piles of coruscating words, which to him were words and nothing else. Zola practised this deception, and so did Victor Hugo, but never Oscar Wilde in his references to classical antiquity. Take the example quoted above. He frequently refers in his writings, as he frequently referred in his talk, to Tanagra statuettes. Those who ever proclaimed the man an impostor have been heard say that of Tanagra statuettes he knew no more than any man who has access to dictionary or encyclopædia. Now, during the many days that he spent in Athens with Professor Mahaffy and his friends, the Museums at Athens were sedulously visited, and particular attention seems to have been paid to these statuettes, which in 1877 had only recently been unearthed in Tanagra in Boeotia. With what

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attention "these little figures of terra cotta, often delicately modelled and richly coloured both in dress and limbs" were then studied appears very clearly from Mahaffy's book. In Chapter III. of the "Rambles in Greece," under the heading, "Athens—The Museums," we find several pages devoted to a learned and interesting description of these *figurines*. There can be no doubt that on his return from Greece there was no man in England better entitled and better qualified to talk and write about Tanagra statuettes than Oscar Wilde. And the same proof could be given of the genuine knowledge which he possessed of all the other beauties of antique times. When, during the visit to Paris in 1883, he was heard to say that he had passed hours in the Louvre in admiration before the Venus of Milos, people shrugged their shoulders and charged him with posturing affectation. Anyone who reads Mahaffy's book, and thus gathers under what guidance Oscar's eyes were opened to the admiration of Greek statuary, by what teaching his critical sense of this form of Art was created and fostered, will understand that his sincerity could in no way be called into account any more than his profound knowledge of the subject. The man was steeped in the glories that were Greece. Those wonderful

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passages in "De Profundis" in which he writes with such facility and eloquence of the classic days were inspired by no readings from a prison Lemprière. They came to him as naturally as came to him those other passages which refer to the horrors, commonplaces of the life which he was leading.

"For the Greek gods, in spite of the white and red of their fair fleet limbs, were not really what they appeared to be." Such are the opening words of a passage of great beauty which it can be maintained was written as simply and with no more straining for effect than, for instance, the passage beginning :

"I am completely penniless and absolutely homeless."

It is not possible here, although it would be of paramount scientific interest, to inquire too closely into the question whether with this awakening of enthusiasm for the beauties of antique Greece the latent tendency towards perversion was not also developed. If danger there be in a classical education to lads who have certain hereditary instincts and abnormalities of temperament, certainly no more powerful means for breaking down such resistance as religious education, training, and example might oppose could have been found

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than this journey in Greece. That remarkable writer, Henri de Régner, in his study of Oscar Wilde, which appears in his volume, "*Figures et Caractères*," directly attributes his downfall to the fact that he had so steeped himself in the life of gone-by days that he did not realise the world in which he was actually living. The result would be that the laws of modern society would not restrain his powerful impulses. "*Je n'insisterai pas sur les causes d'une pareille aventure*," writes Henri de Régner. "*On les connaît. M. Wilde croyait vivre en Italie au temps de la Renaissance ou en Grèce au temps de Socrate. On l'a puni d'une erreur chronologique, et durement, étant donné qu'il vivait à Londres où cet anachronisme est, paraît-il, fréquent.*" There can be little doubt that the views enunciated above will by a more enlightened posterity be accepted in palliation of the things with which his name is so cruelly associated. That will be when men have attained to some scientific comprehension of mental pathology. At present even the pathology of the body is only just emerging from ignorance, superstition and charlatanism.

The delights of the tour in Greece were so great—how great they must have been will appear to anyone who reads Mahaffy's wonderful

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book—that Oscar Wilde failed to return to Oxford by the date when it was required of him to do. The Dons of Magdalen fined him forty-five pounds for this breach of discipline. The money was, however, returned to him when in the following year he so greatly distinguished himself by taking a First Class in the “Honour Finals,” and by winning the Newdigate Prize for English Verse. The poem which he sent in for this competition was a poem entitled “Ravenna.” It is considered by many of Oscar Wilde’s admirers as a very fine piece of work, and it certainly shows a tremendous advance on the work which is to be found in the magazines, to which reference has been made above. By a curious coincidence, in which the ancients might have seen a manifestation of the dread irony of the gods, a fortuitous circumstance had equipped him admirably for success in this poetical tourney. A triumph resulted ; both he himself and his friends may have considered the circumstance a piece of rare good fortune. When we review his whole career we may ask ourselves if, indeed, it was for his happiness that this triumph was won, and that in consequence he turned with confidence to the pursuit of that career of letters which when it is pursued side by side with the quest of pleasure and excitement leads inevitably

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to physical and mental ruin. The fortuitous circumstance referred to is described in the following terms by Mr Hamilton:—

“ During a vacation ramble in 1877 he started for Greece. Visiting Ravenna by chance on the way he obtained material for a poem on that ancient city; and singularly enough ‘Ravenna,’ was afterwards given out as the topic for the Newdigate competition, and on the 26th June 1878 the Newdigate prize poem ‘Ravenna’ by Oscar Wilde of Magdalen, was recited in the theatre, Oxford.” The poem was, as is usual, published by Messrs T. Shrimpton & Sons. The original edition is very rare, and high prices are obtained for copies. Many forged editions have been issued which can be distinguished from the original by the fact that on title and cover pages the University Arms are generally missing. The poem has been reprinted *in extenso* in Mr Mosher’s collected edition of Wilde’s poems, published in Portland, Mass.: a very beautiful volume.

The poem contains some beautiful lines, and anyone who remembers the extraordinary musical beauty of Oscar Wilde’s voice will readily understand that, as is recorded in a contemporary account of the recital of “Ravenna” by its author, “it was listened to with rapt

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attention and frequently applauded" by the crowded audience. Here are the opening lines :

"O lone Ravenna ! many a tale is told,
Of thy great glories in the days of old :
Two thousand years have passed since thou didst see
Cæsar ride forth to royal victory.
Mighty thy name when Rome's lean eagles flew
From Britain's isles to far Euphrates blue ;
And of the peoples thou wast noble queen,
Till in thy streets the Goth and Hun were seen."

So far the listening competitors may have wondered at their defeat. Immediately afterwards, however, they would be forced to admit that a true poet had revealed himself.

"Discrowned by man, deserted by the sea,
Thou sleepest, rocked in lonely misery !
No longer, now upon the swelling tide,
Pine-forest like, thy myriad galleys ride !
For where the brass-peaked ships were wont to float,
The weary shepherd pipes his mournful note ;
And the white sheep are free to come and go
Where Adria's purple waters used to flow."

How many of those who were present in the Sheldonian on that June afternoon and applauded the handsome youth as he recited in the most melodious of voices his effective lines realised that they were listening to what was a very allegory of the startling contrasts that were to mark the poet's life. Greatness was to come

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to him, and upon greatness, desolation and lonely ruin were to follow. The man, though he knew it not, was telling the story of his own splendours to come, and of the misery that was to follow upon them.

CHAPTER VIII

Oscar Wilde in Masquerade—A Professor of Æsthetics—The Object Pursued—The Æsthetic Movement—Oscar Wilde's Siege of London—His Success and his Failure—The Testimony of an Eye-Witness—Society's Attitude towards him—Possible Explanation of this Attitude—Oscar Wilde's Repartee—Whistler in the same Dilemma—Wilde's Volume of "Poems"—the Dress of the Cinderella Muse—In what the "Poems" greatly triumphed—"Howell and James"—The Friendship of Edmund Yates—The Admiration and Regard of Sarah Bernhardt—The "Poems" and the Critics—The "Poems" and a Professional Humorist—The "Poems" in America—Oscar Wilde sails for the States—A Send-off in the "World"—What Oscar may have felt.

ON 1st May in this year 1878 Oscar Wilde appeared at a fancy-dress ball at Headington Hill given by Mrs Morrell. He presented himself in the costume of Prince Rupert, and his fine and striking appearance was commented upon in the social chronicles of the time. For some period of his life subsequent to this event he was to be seen figuring in masquerade. Later on Society forced him to assume another *travesti*, which in its essential features was not dissimilar to the one he had assumed when he went up to London in the rôle of a "Professor of Æsthetics and Art critic," as Foster describes him in his *Alumni*

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Oxonienses. The more one studies the lives of great men the more does the certitude impress itself upon one that our human destinies are ruled by a power of which a mocking irony is the prime characteristic. The ancients discovered it long ago; the modern world is beginning to perceive it. For some part of his life Oscar Wilde masqueraded in defiance of Society, and then later on Society made him masquerade in defiance of himself.

An authoritative writer, who, however, throughout Oscar Wilde's career was his sternest critic and censor, declared at the time of his downfall that Oscar Wilde had been heard to explain that the reason why he assumed that costume which it pleased him to describe as the "æsthetic costume" was merely to attract attention to his personality. He adds that Oscar Wilde had said that for months he had tried in vain to find a publisher for his collected poems, and that having failed to do so, because he was an unknown man, he determined to make himself known, and had hit upon the device of appearing in public in an extraordinary dress. He adopted as the "æsthetic costume" a velvet coat, knee-breeches, a loose shirt with a turn-down collar, and a floating tie of some unusual shade, fastened in a *Lavallière* knot, and he not

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unfrequently appeared in public carrying in his hand a lily or a sunflower, which he used to contemplate with an expression of the greatest admiration. Let it be added to this that he wore his hair long, and was clean-shaven as to his face; and when it is remembered how striking a form and what memorable features were his already by Nature it will be understood what attention his appearance must have attracted. One might find other and more charitable explanations for this self-travesty; perhaps with all the more justification that commercial instinct does not appear to have been very strong in Oscar Wilde. He was a young man at the time; he was by nature and atavism inclined to *Schwaermerei*; he may have thought that the costume suited him; he may have wished to set Society at defiance at the prompting of that Anarchist spirit which was within him, as it is within all men who are really great. For the rest, whatever the man's motives were, that he gave effect to his plan shows that he possessed great moral courage. It is by no means every man who has the strength of mind to make a laughing-stock of himself in the eyes of London. The London *gamins* are pitiless; and on each of his walks abroad the young "æsthete" must have veritably run the gauntlet. It may further

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be noted that many men and women of approved capacity have shown and do show this curious love of self-advertisement. It has always been the malady of the great ; in recent years it has grown into an epidemic. The advance of commercialism may account for it. Commercialism has made it clear that the only method by which a man can call attention to the excellence of his wares is by persistent puffery. Artists, actors, writers, philosophers and politicians have equally wares to sell—in this age every man who is not independent is a tradesman of sorts—and one can hardly blame them if they adopt the means for selling these wares which succeed in other branches of trade. The public, moreover, is gradually becoming so accustomed to these methods that far from regarding with suspicion the man of letters who by the eccentricity of his costume, the length of his hair, the frequency or the rarity of personal mentions and portraits of him which appear in the papers, is the carrier of his own advertising boards, the importunate distributor of personal leaflets, it gives more and more its exclusive attention to the person who most loudly shouts his wares. This is the case in England and America. In the Latin countries and in Germany where art is still regarded in

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much the same light as religion these tricks would fail of their desired effect. But in England we are a commercial nation, and as Doctor Johnson never tired of pointing out to Boswell, we must be dealt with by commercial methods.

There is no call in this biography to give any extended description of that æsthetic movement in England with which Oscar Wilde for a short period of his life, and for motives which are not quite clear to us, associated himself. Anyone who is curious on the subject of one of those crazes which sent the British public once more into what Carlyle called a "bottomless abyss of delirium and confusion and nameless distraction"¹ should read Walter Hamilton's excellent and most interesting book: "The Æsthetic Movement in England," to which already frequent reference has been made, and from which material yet remains to be drawn. It is the work of a man who was not unsympathetic with the movement, and who had for the leaders and

¹ "Carlyle once observed to my father: Upon the whole, the British public, with its contagious enthusiasms, reminds me of nothing so much as the Gadarene swine. There they are quietly grubbing and grunting in search of what pignuts or other aliments may present themselves for their sustenance and comfort, when suddenly the devil enters into them, up go their tails into the sky, and away they go, plunging into bottomless abysses of delirium and confusion and nameless distraction" ("Random Reminiscences," by Charles H. E. Brookfield).

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camp-followers of it esteem, admiration, or tolerance. And side by side with Mr Hamilton's book, the volumes of *Punch* for the years 1880-1883 may be turned over. It is from the satirist that one learns most of social life; and Juvenal and Saint Simon are the best historians.

"The Æsthetes," wrote Mr Hamilton, "are they who pride themselves upon having found out what is the really beautiful in nature and art, their faculties and tastes being educated up to the point necessary for the full appreciation of such qualities; whilst those who do not see the true and the beautiful—the outsiders in fact—are termed Philistines."

Even at the height of the craze there was a very considerable proportion of the public in England which did not even know the meaning of the word æsthetic. It was usual enough to hear people express the surmise that as anæsthetic was something which sent you to sleep, an æsthetic must be something which. . . . The movement was generally associated with sun-flowers, certain peculiar shades in pottery and tissues, a languid demeanour, and a certain angularity of furniture and attitude. The penalty for this craze is still being paid by an innocent posterity in the enormities of cheap and tawdry accessories which are forced upon



OSCAR WILDE.

"O, I feel just as happy as a bright Sunflower!"
Lays of Christy Minstrelsy.

Æsthete of Æsthetes!
 What's in a name?
 The poet is WILDE,
 But his poetry's tame.

CARICATURE REPRODUCED BY PERMISSION OF THE PROPRIETORS OF "PUNCH"

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the ignorant public by the manufacturers under the sacred name of Art, never so ruthlessly profaned. As usual, certain men who put themselves forward as active agents of the movement, of the reform, attained to popularity and wealth; certain tradesmen, commercial or self-styled artists, emerged from poverty and obscurity by supplying the properties of the burlesque which England was enacting. The sincere men who had initiated all this enthusiasm remained, as usual, in the background, and continue to-day in the same serene solitude and silence the work they then began. For his part in popularising their theories—one might almost say in burlesquing them—Oscar Wilde derived a certain and wide notoriety, leaped into the public eye, found a publisher for his poems, and, in the event, engagements to lecture in the three kingdoms and in America. On the other hand, he started his artistic career amidst the suspicion of his contemporaries. This suspicion still clings to his name. The public memory is tenacious. The public mind does not readily accord to one man the right to play more than one part in life. It is diffident of versatility. Universality of genius it blankly refuses to admit. The funny man can never get people to take him seriously. Sydney Smith has described this. The Hanswurst must

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be Hanswurst till the end of the chapter. There can be no doubt that Oscar Wilde's early eccentricities created an erroneous impression concerning his capacities which for years militated, and in certain quarters still militates against the reputation which his high genius entitled him to enjoy. Fame is not to be violated with impunity ; and when the claims of the Pont d'Arcole were denied, could the peacock's feather and the sunflower prevail ? The pose, such as it was, was eminently successful. If notoriety were sought after, it was gained to the fullest extent. *Punch* celebrates week in week out the eccentricities of the school. On the parts played in this circumstance by both Du Maurier and Burnand Mr Hamilton's most interesting book can be consulted.

There can be no doubt that all the time when Oscar Wilde was thus mumming and masquerading the bitterness at his heart was great. Knowing what was in him ; feeling the flame of the genius that burned within ; conscious of the part that he might have been playing on the stage of the world, to none more than to himself can his notoriety, acquired as it was and kept alive by such means, have appeared despicable and a matter for regret. At the same time it helped him to some extent to gain that *entrée*

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into London society which when he left Oxford and went to the metropolis was his immediate object. The lion-hunters with which the capital abounds were not sorry to be able to produce at their tables and during their receptions the man about whom England was speaking, and of whom the comic papers made weekly sport. In this way he certainly achieved some part of his purpose, which, otherwise, might altogether have failed of effect. For in a world where the first question that is asked about a new-comer is : " What has he got ? " and the next is : " Who is he ? " the younger son of an Irish professional man, with the very smallest of incomes was doomed by the very nature of things to utter failure of his social ambitions. In addition to this the reputation of his brother Willy, who had preceded him to London, was already a damaging one ; and there is no doubt that Oscar's subsequent animosity towards his brother was caused by his remembrance of the extent to which he had been a stumbling-block in his early path, when the conquest of social London was the aim of his endeavours. But for the curiosity which attached to his name it is certain that none of the doors through which he desired to pass would ever have opened before him. As it was, he had the moderate social success which

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London accords *en passant* to those who can divert its stagnant ennui. But he was never popular in society ; he was mistrusted and misunderstood ; and in the end he was disliked. His superiority was too crushing. The men and women who gathered round him wishing to laugh had the disagreeable surprise of finding that the buffoon's bladder was weighted with lead, and that the point of his wit left an intolerable sting behind it. A letter is in existence written by a lady who belongs to the highest English nobility, and who saw him in those early days in London. She appreciated his qualities to the full, but she also was forced to admit that as far as winning the suffrages of what is known as good society in London he failed utterly.

" I knew him," so runs the letter, " first at a Huxley dinner, just after he left Oxford. I was then old enough to be his mother, but I thought I had never met so wonderful and brilliant a creature. . . . Even you," she adds, addressing the person to whom this letter was written, " seem hardly to know how the ordinary run of English society *hated* him. I was never allowed to ask him to our house. How unconscious he must have been of this hatred when he thought that society would stand by him. . . . Poor

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thing, that he should have represented an aristocrat to the howling crowd is most curious."

One has to remember that England is a commercial country where worth, merit, character, quality, genius are estimated only by the amount of money which a man earns or possesses. The only poet who is allowed to show consciousness of superiority is the poet who can show from royalties earned by his books an income superior to that enjoyed by the people whom he wishes to impress with his superiority. Our novelists rank according to the amount of shillings or pounds they receive per thousand words. In England the poor man is not allowed to show pride. Assumption of superiority which in the man of genius is inevitable is resented in English society when that man of genius is not able to show the actual cash value of his talents. That the younger son of a Dublin oculist, who was reported to have a bare two hundred a year, derived from land in Ireland, should try to impress London society; should show superiority and act with arrogance, was such an offence against the first precepts of English Society and the Church of England catechism that the hatred and indignation of his contemporaries can only be too readily believed. It requires a man more versed in psychology than is the ordinary man

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of the world to understand that a man of genius is proud *because he is conscious of his superiority, because he cannot help but feel this superiority, and feeling it cannot help but show it*, guard himself against this as carefully as he may. When André Chenier waiting his turn at the guillotine struck his head against the uprights of the instrument of punishment and infamy and cried out : " And yet there were great things here ! " the mob roared with laughter. The mob always laughs when the man whom it has degraded yet claims any kind of pre-eminence. Oscar Wilde in these early days of the attempted Conquest of London displayed a pride which impressed the onlookers as arrogance. He figured as the *maître* ; he assumed the office of arbiter, and he was, perhaps, too young and inexperienced to carry the burthen of the part. He used to relate with some gusto certain of the retorts which he had made during this period. They display that quality which Rabelais describes as *outré-cuidance*, which where it does not subjugate excites inextinguishable enmity. One of these stories also shows his readiness of repartee. One day arriving very late at a luncheon party his hostess mildly remonstrated with him for the delay, pointing to the clock in support of her rebuke. " And what, madam," he answered,

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“ do you think that that little clock knows of what the great golden sun is doing ? ” The retort was an able one ; but none the less would that hostess feel that as an excuse for her burned *entrées* and the inconvenience of her other guests ; it was hardly the *amende honorable* which she was entitled to expect, and in her heart there would be a feeling of grudge against the wit. This anecdote enables one to institute a comparison between the readiness and powers of repartee of Oscar Wilde and the same qualities in that rival of his, Whistler. Whistler has always been considered as far superior in this respect to Oscar Wilde, and tourneys of repartee are quoted in which invariably the younger man was defeated. Yet on a similar occasion, Whistler, arriving late for lunch and being chidden therefore, found nothing better to do, or to say, than to fix his eyeglass firmly in his eye, to stare around the room and to cry, “ Ha ! Ha ! Lunch ! Lunch ! Lunch ! Bunch ! Bunch ! Bunch ! ” The hearers laughed and found the wit divine ; but when the thing had crystallised it must have appeared to the hostess even a more pitiful excuse than the one which had been tendered by Oscar Wilde.

During his early years in London Oscar Wilde did not live with his mother and Willy. He

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occupied lodgings in unfashionable districts. For some months he lived in a couple of furnished rooms in Salisbury Street, off the Strand, in the very Bohemia of letters. It was not till later that he moved to Charles Street, Grosvenor Square, which was his address during the last period of his bachelor days. His income was a very small one, and the struggle to figure as a man of the world was constant. By mortgaging and selling his property in Ireland, by the help of friends and by anonymous literary work, he was just able to maintain himself. If hopes of wealth ever came to him they proceeded from the fact that a rich friend, a lady, had bestowed upon him a large quantity of shares in Keeley's Perpetual Motion Engine, a fraud in which she had invested very largely, and in which she had the greatest confidence. At one time when Oscar's name was most prominently before London as the darling of London society his entire assets consisted of a sheaf of these worthless green papers.

If his desire in assuming the masquerade of the "æsthetic costume" was to influence a publisher to accept the risk of printing his poems, success here, at least, awaited him. He found in David Bogue, who was at that time in business as a high-class publisher in St Martin's Lane, a

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commercial man ready to produce his book in the best style. In the *Athenæum* for 2nd July 1881 the book was announced in the following terms :—

Now ready. Crown 8vo. Price 10s. 6d.

POEMS. BY OSCAR WILDE

PRINTED ON DUTCH HANDMADE PAPER AND
HANDSOMELY BOUND IN PARCHMENT

This advertisement to anyone who knows the difficulties that the young aspiring poet has in finding a publisher for his works is a plain certificate of success. The price at which the volume was offered, the paper on which it was printed, and the parchment in which it was bound are all so many tributes to the skill with which the young man had impressed his personality on business London. It is not in this livery—this court dress rather—that the Cinderella Muse goes to the Palace of Fame, unless, indeed, a fairy godmother has intervened.

The irony of things shows itself once more on this page of the *Athenæum*. As one glances down the list of David Bogue's announcements one notices among the other new books which he was issuing at the same time as Oscar Wilde's poems the following works : "Music and

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Morals," by Haweis; "Conscious Matter," by W. Stewart Duncan; and (here one can almost perceive the sardonic laughter of the immortals) "How to Make the Best of Life," by J. Mortimer Granville.

This volume of poems consisted mainly of reprints of verses which Oscar Wilde had contributed to various periodicals, *Kottabos*, *The Dublin University Magazine*, *The Irish Monthly*, and certain London periodicals and journals. After leaving Oxford he had published poems in different weekly and monthly papers. Edmund Yates, who had a great esteem for him, and was always his literary and social protector, had opened to him the pages of *Time* and the columns of *The World*. Much of his most effective verse had appeared in *The World*. Of these poems, which have now been reprinted, and are open to the judgment, nothing need be said in criticism in this place beyond the fact that they appealed very strongly to the public of the day, and that four editions were readily sold in a few weeks. Many found great delight in them. The great and beautiful Ellen Terry, to whom the young poet dedicated two of the sonnets in this book, was charmed by his tributes; and what better success could a poet desire than having hymned Ellen Terry to win a smile of

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approval from her lips? Of the two sonnets, "To Portia," and "To Queen Henrietta Maria," which appeared in this book, the one which gave most pleasure to the wonderful and great-hearted artist to whom they were addressed was the latter. This is it :—

QUEEN HENRIETTA MARIA

In the lone tent, waiting for victory,
She stands with eyes marred by the mists of pain,
Like some wan lily overdrenched with rain,
The clamorous clang of arms, the ensanguined day,
War's ruin and the wreck of chivalry
To her proud soul no common fear can bring,
Bravely she tarrieth for her Lord, the King,
Her soul a-flame with passionate ecstasy.
O Hair of Gold ! O Crimson Lips ! O Face !
Made for the luring and the love of man,
With thee I do forget the toil and stress,
The loveless road that knows no resting-place,
Time's straitened pulse, the soul's dread weariness,
My freedom and my life republican.

This sonnet then achieved what many sonnets of far greater beauty have failed to achieve. It appealed to the lady to whom it was inscribed. It is still remembered as a tribute by one upon whom tributes have been rained down like the dew of heaven. For the rest this supreme artist like many other of the greatest women of the day has always had admiration for the poet and pity for the man. In the spring of 1905

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while England was still wondering whether it would be right and seemly to pronounce the name of the man who, although he had written "De Profundis," had yet ten years previously been convicted of conduct for which he had paid the utmost penalty of the law and the further penalty of some years of lingering agony and a miserable death, at that time, then, Miss Terry had the courage, speaking publicly at Frascati's at a meeting of the Gallery First Nighters' Club, to include the name of Oscar Wilde amongst a list of men whom she used to see at the Lyceum in the old triumphant days. "In the gallery and pit at the dear old Lyceum," she said, "there used to be seen faces of many men who had won or were about to win distinction in the world—the Burne-Joneses; the Justin M'Carthys; Alfred Gilbert, the great sculptor; the late Oscar Wilde; the poet O'Shaughnessy." The reference was a courageous one; the act was worthy of the woman. Its quotation here serves another purpose. It enables us to gather that in the days when Oscar Wilde was writing his verse he was not a prosperous man. The young man whose circumstances force him to go to the pit or the gallery of the theatre *à la mode* will find difficulty in storming the fortresses of the British aristocracy. For the "limitless



No. 163.—PRIVATE FAITH'S VIEW.—Members of the Salvation Army, led by General Oscar Wilde, joining in a hymn.

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ambition " of his, of which he used to speak as a young man, aimed at the very highest social success. The upper middle-class from which he sprung filled him with disdain. He used to speak with contempt of Bayswater as the stronghold of all that was common and vulgar, and to be avoided. "A Bayswater view of things"—he could find nothing more scathing than that. When in the end he found that the higher aristocracy, while willing enough to be amused by him, did not readily yield to his advances, he came to speak with some contempt of the old nobility. "They are nothing but exaggerated farmers," he used to say. Amongst the modern *souches* he had some acquaintances, and, perhaps, because of their greater affability, these found no more valourous defender than Oscar Wilde. It was an imprudent thing for anyone to venture to joke on the nobility of the big brewers, for he happened to have some friends among men who had risen to the ranks of the aristocracy by the ladder of heaped-up barrels of beer. It is a fact that social success always impressed Oscar Wilde. The man who "made money and "got on" in life enjoyed his regard; for the failure he had nothing but abhorrence. Intimate friends of his have wondered to hear him speaking with praise of very

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common fellows who by reason of a little commercial cunning had reached to reputation and prosperity. In this respect he was essentially a worldly man, and, so considered, one wonders whether the Anarchist doctrines to which he later yielded did not result from his vexation at the small amount of real social success to which he attained as a young man. In only a very few good houses in London was he taken seriously, or invited as an honoured guest. Literary history affords few more distressing pictures than these early years of Oscar Wilde, where we see a man of supreme superiority wasting his time and humiliating himself in running after the worthless favours of men and women so entirely his inferiors. In the artistic world, however, his success was incontestable. He enjoyed from an early age the friendship and approval of many men of high distinction. He was the associate of Whistler ; he sat at the feet of George Meredith ; he was the companion of the Pre-Raphaelites ; and he proclaimed a sympathy for Swinburne which the elder poet did not reciprocate.

In later life he did not often refer to these days, and when he did so it was to talk of the arcana of London rather than of its heights. He had anecdotes to tell of an extraordinary

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man named Howell, who seems to have exploited the naïve Pre-Raphaelites in a pitiless and constant manner, and who had had many amusing passages of arms with Whistler. For the cleverness of this man Oscar Wilde seemed to have some admiration. He used to quote as a witty saying of Howell's a retort that he once made when a group of artists, anxious to get rid of him, had offered to pay his passage out to Australia. "Who," said Howell, "would go to Australia, if he had the money to go with?" He found that it was a very clever invention on the part of Howell, being asked one day by Whistler whether he had ever happened to ride in cab No. 1 in London to have answered: "No, but a few days ago I drove home in cab No. 2." He seems to have watched with poignant interest the career of that unfortunate artist Solomons, who, as Fate would have it, survived Oscar Wilde by some years, and died under circumstances not more tragic than those which attended the death of the man who used to express such pity for his terrible life. That even at the time when "Patience" had been running for some months and Bogue was announcing his poems at the price of half-a-guinea he had not imposed himself on true London society is made clear by a note which Edmund Yates, his friend,

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inserted in *The World* as a preliminary announcement of these poems. It appeared in the number for 6th July 1881, and runs as follows: "People who, hearing of Mr Oscar Wilde, ask who he is and what he has done, will now be able to learn, as a volume of Mr Wilde's collected poems will shortly be published." That Edmund Yates had a sincere admiration for Oscar Wilde will be all the more readily understood when it is recorded that many of Wilde's poems which appeared in *The World* had brought to the editor from different parts of the world letters of high commendation from the readers of that journal. One incident especially appealed to Yates. It came to his knowledge that a copy of *The World* containing Wilde's poem *Ave Imperatrix* had been received by a mess of British officers in one of the regiments which followed Lord Roberts on his march to Kandahar, and that these men had been struck with the truth and beauty of the picture which the poet had drawn of the very spot where they were encamped. Sarah Bernhardt's admiration for and friendship with the young poet would also impress that most Parisian of Londoners, Edmund Yates. Sarah always had a high regard for Oscar Wilde. She used to say that she had been charmed with the courtesy of his manner, and with his kindness of

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heart. "Most men who are civil to actresses and render them services," she used to say, "have an *arrière-pensée*. It was not so with Oscar Wilde. He was a devoted attendant, and did much to make things pleasant and easy for me in London, but he never appeared to pay court." In other words Sarah had discovered amongst the young men of London one who was an English gentleman in every sense of that much misused term. And this may be put on record here once and for all. Oscar Wilde was the *beau idéal* of an English gentleman. That is to say the sane Oscar Wilde. What he may have been when his epileptiform fits took him it is for the outcasts to say who saw him on these rare and mournful occasions.

Oscar Wilde's volume of poems received with enthusiasm by the public found little favour with the critics. The book was roundly abused. *The Saturday Review*, which in those days had still some importance as an arbiter in literature, contemptuously disposed of the book in a few sentences at the end of an article on "Recent Poetry." This review appears in the number for 23rd July 1881. It begins: "Mr Wilde's verses belong to a class which is the special terror of the reviewers, the poetry which is neither good nor bad, which calls for neither praise nor

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ridicule, and in which we search in vain for any personal touch of thought or music." Lower down, "The great fault of all such writing as this is the want of literary sincerity which it displays. For instance, Mr Wilde brings into his verse the names of innumerable birds and flowers, because he likes the sound of their names, not because he has made any observation of their habits. He thinks that the meadow-sweet and the wood-anemone bloom at the same time, that that shy and isolated flower, the harebell 'breaks across the woodlands in masses,' 'like a sudden flush of sea,' and that owls are commonly met with in mid-ocean." Strong exception is next taken to the sensual tone of the poems, and the review concludes with the following: "This book is not without traces of cleverness, but it is marred everywhere by imitation, insincerity, and bad taste."

This reviewer was no doubt sincere, for we find in his comments the repetition of much that, so far, we have heard raised up in blame against the young poet. We have heard him spoken of as "an average sort of man"; we know that his educational weakness was a neglect of the rudiments—in this case he is blamed for a lack of the botanical and zoological rudiments;

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and we have already seen him charged with imitation of others. Moreover, he is here once more rebuked for that imprudent manner of his of talking about the physical beauties of man and woman which later on was to render him such signal disservice. It was a habit gained from his classical training and his enthusiasm for the literature of the ancients ; but it was a literary habit which in modern days was fraught with considerable danger.

The Athenæum gave him the place of honour in its number for 23rd July 1881. The long review of his poems occupied its first page. The review is a very careful one, well-written, as are all the reviews in that periodical which stands first amidst the critical papers of the world. It was evidently the work of a man who was not biassed either for or against the young poet, and who had very conscientiously prepared himself for his task as the critic of the book. The review was an unfavourable one. It begins : " Mr Wilde's volume of poems may be regarded as the evangel of a new creed. From other gospels it differs in coming after, instead of before, the cult it seeks to establish." " We fail to see however," continues the reviewer, after an exposition of Oscar Wilde's teachings, " that the apostle of the new worship has any distinct

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message." Lower down, "Turning to the execution of the poems there is something to admire. Mr Wilde has a keen perception of some aspects of natural beauty. Single lines might be extracted which convey striking and accurate pictures. The worst faults are artificiality and insincerity, and an extravagant accentuation of whatever in modern verse most closely approaches the *estilo culto* of the sixteenth century." An able and scientific, if not very charitable, *requisitoire* bearing out the charges in this indictment follows. The charge of imitation is particularly insisted upon.

"The sonnet on the 'Massacres of the Christians in Bulgaria' reflects Milton's sonnet on the 'Massacres in Piedmont.' The 'Garden of Eros' recalls at times Mr Swinburne—at times Alexander Smith. In the descriptions of flowers which occur in the poem last named there is a direct and reiterated imitation of Shakespeare.

' Some violets lie
That will not look the gold sun in the face
For fear of too much splendour '—

reminds one of the

' Pale primroses
That die unmarried ere they can behold
Bright Phoebus in his strength."

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Mr Wilde's

' Budding marjoram, which but to kiss
Would sweeten Cytheræa's lips '—

and his

' Meadow-sweet
Whiter than Juno's throat '

brings back the

' Violets dim,
But sweeter than the lids of Juno's eyes
Or Cytheræa's breath.'

And the 'rustling bluebells'—rustling bluebells
is a vile phrase—that come

' Almost before the blackbird finds a mate,
And overstay the swallow '

are but the daffodils

' That come before the swallow dares.'

"Traces of this kind of imitation abound, and there is scarcely a poet of high mark in the present century whose influence is not perceptible."

The conclusion is not an inspiring one: "Work of this nature has no element of endurance, and Mr Wilde's poems, in spite of some grace and beauty as we have said, will, when their temporary notoriety is exhausted, find a place on the shelves of those only who hunt after the curious in literature. They may, perhaps, serve

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as an illustration in some chapter on the revival in the nineteenth century of the Gongorism of the sixteenth."

Against the charge of imitation Wilde's warmest friends will not be able—were they desirous of so doing—to defend him. He was essentially an artist, and the artist is essentially imitative. Art is imitation. The only original creation which is not the reproduction of anything else of which we know is the creation of the world, and on that circumstance the data are too vague for us to be quite certain that here too imitation did not overhang the labour. Models were certainly not lacking, or the astronomers have misled us. There has never been a writer yet against whom charges of plagiarism have not been brought. Of those charges Molière briefly and wittingly exonerated himself. Molière was in the right. The artist is entitled to appropriate for his own treatment the thoughts, the conceptions of others. It is not the highest form of literary art, but it gives pleasure, and it is a tribute to the man from whom the borrowing took place. It seems that it would be as unfair to say that a *prima donna* who sings us the Jewel Song out of "Faust" ought not to be listened to because we have heard other *prime donne* sing that song before she came upon the stage. It is one of

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the most detestable axioms of commercial Philistinism that the exclusive right in a thought or a comparison belongs to the man who first voiced them. In the Republic of Letters and amongst true artists no such proprietary instinct prevails. It is the true artist's greatest joy to feel that he has given forth fecundating atoms which shall breed beauty in ages to come.

Most of the reviews were equally unfavourable. In some, private enmity was allowed to show itself. The notice which appeared in *Punch* may be humorous, it is certainly not marked with courtesy. As a specimen of the kind of criticism of himself, which Oscar Wilde had provoked, some extracts from this notice may be quoted. It commences thus :—

“ Mr Lambert Streyke in *The Colonel* published a book of poems for the benefit of his followers and his own ; Mr Oscar Wilde has followed his example.” As Mr Hamilton points out, the character of Lambert Streyke, in Burnand's adaptation *The Colonel*, is that of a paltry swindler, who shamming æsthetic tastes imposes upon a number of rather silly ladies, and is finally exposed by *The Colonel*.

The review continues : “ The cover is consummate, the paper is distinctly precious, the binding is beautiful, and the type is utterly too.

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'Poems,' by Oscar Wilde, that is the title of the book of the æsthetic singer, which comes to us arrayed in white vellum and gold. There is a certain amount of originality about the binding, but that is more than can be said for the inside of the volume. Mr Wilde may be æsthetic, but he is not original. This is a volume of echoes, it is Swinburne and water, while here and there we notice that the author has been reminiscent of Mr Rossetti and Mrs Browning."

The poems were commercially a great success, and this success pleased Oscar Wilde very much. He used to speak with pride of the fact that his volume of poems had run into four editions in as many weeks. For the rest, as his powers developed he came to look upon this early work in the light of a *peché de jeunesse*. Certainly the author of "Keats' Love-letters" and other of his later poems could not help but be critical towards the verse contained in this volume. Yet such as it is it has outlived the various periods of notoriety which brought their author's name so prominently before the world. Recently republished in America by Mr Mosher of Portland a large and constant demand for the book continues.

Already at the time of its original publication the American edition met with great success. In

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a paragraph in *The World* for 9th November 1881 we read: "Mr Oscar Wilde has arranged to leave England next month for America where he will deliver lectures on Art subjects. Mr Wilde's volume of poems, which has had a very large sale in America, will have prepared the way for him and no doubt insured him a brilliant reception in that country. I hear that Mr Wilde is also making arrangements for bringing out an original play before he leaves London." The play here referred to is "Vera," a Nihilist drama. It was not produced until much later in America, where it met with instant failure. The great objection to the play was the fact that it contains only one female role, that of Vera, the Nihilist heroine. This drama has been printed, and can be obtained in London, with various annotations.

It was not, as amiably represented by Edmund Yates, as the author of a successful volume of poems that Oscar Wilde received encouragement to go to America to lecture. It was suggested to him that a good deal of curiosity existed in that country in "the Æsthetic Movement and School," that his personality aroused interest, and that a profitable lecturing campaign might be carried out there. At the same time he was anxious to produce "Vera," which he had not

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been able to place upon the stage in London. He had no arrangement with any *impresario* when he left England. Major Pond afterwards undertook to "run him" in the States; that is to say after his appearance at the Chattering Hall and his success there.

He sailed on board the *Arizona* on Saturday, 24th December 1881, his original intention being to deliver one lecture on the "Recent Growth of Art in England," and he proposed to be absent for three or four months. A few days before his departure there appeared in *The World*, under the heading "The Lights of London," a sketch of him by H. B., described as "Ego Upto Snuffibus Poeta," with certain humorous verses attached, of which the following may be quoted :

" Albeit nurtured in democracy
And liking best that state Bohemian
Where each man borrows sixpence and no man
Has aught but paper collars ; yet I see
Exactly where to take a liberty.
Better to be thought one, whom most abuse
For speech of donkey and for look of goose,
Than that the world should pass in silence by.
Wherefore I wear a sunflower in my coat
Cover my shoulders with my flowing hair
Tie verdant satin round my open throat,
Culture and love I cry, and ladies smile,
And seedy critics overflow with bile
While with my Prince long Sykes's meal I share."

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The parody meant to be friendly, but there can be no doubt that it aroused bitter feelings of self-reproach in Oscar Wilde's mind. Of self-reproach, but also of indignant revolt against the order of things which in these modern days condemns a man of action to inactivity, who, if he would emerge from the stagnant obscurity to which the world condemns him, must play the part of pantaloon. Vital, full of genius and of that physical energy which is the genius of the body, fitted for any part that the world has ever yet bestowed upon a man, he found himself at twenty-seven years of age crossing the Atlantic in masquerade, to amuse, to be laughed at, and in his bitter humiliation to appear to take pleasure in the part. In the whole of his mournful career few periods can have been more full of suffering. We reach here the heights of tragedy to which Shakespeare attains in "King Lear." Higher heights, for the king was here a youth. We are to remember too that the man was a man of genius, and that being so he could not help but know it.

CHAPTER IX

Oscar Wilde's Remark about the Atlantic—He is Interviewed—His Personal Appearance—Alleged Resemblance to Irving—Oscar Wilde and the Actors—How Irving once recalled Wilde's look—Oscar's Lecture at the Chickering Hall—The Opinion of New York—Oscar Wilde at Boston—The Harvard Students—A *Fiasco* of Burlesque—The Gentleman and the Boors—Boston's Tribute to the Gentleman—His Lecturing Tour—His Varied Fortunes—Different Impressions of Oscar Wilde—Oscar Wilde and Walt Whitman—Oscar Wilde's Kindness—His Efforts on behalf of an English Friend—He Rescues a Starving Chicago Sculptor—Oscar Wilde and the Moncton Y.M.C.A.—The Bunco Steerers—American Dry Goods—"Robert Elsmere" as a Top-Dressing—The Production of "Vera"—A Paragraph in *Punch*—What America did for Oscar Wilde.

THE next thing that London heard about Oscar Wilde was that on arriving in New York he had declared himself disappointed with the Atlantic. This remark of his was seized upon by his critics as a further proof of the man's intolerable conceit and arrogance. As a matter of fact it was the very simple expression of the feeling with which most people who cross the Atlantic for the first time look back on the passage when that voyage has been performed during fine weather. One expects a tumultuous sea, a succession of awe-inspiring spectacles, great heights, and abysmal

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depths of surging waters; and, when the sea is calm—well, it is calm. The man could not say the simplest thing without exciting malevolent criticism.

Before he landed Oscar Wilde was, as is usual in America with visitors of distinction, "interviewed" by various reporters who had come out to meet the *Arizona*. The report which appeared in the *New York Herald* gives, as he himself declared, the best account of what he said, and may therefore be reproduced here.

"Men may come and men may go, but it is not every day that an apostle (thwaite) of æstheticism comes to the shores of America. It was for this reason that the *Herald* reporter met Mr Oscar Wilde at the first available place—namely, quarantine.

"Mr Wilde was not at all adverse to the American process of interviewing, and began by informing the reporter that he had come to the United States 'to lecture on the *Renaissance*' which he defined as the 'revival of the intimate study of the correlation of all the arts.'

"'I shall lecture,' said Mr Wilde, a little reservedly, 'in Chickering Hall on the *Renaissance*. My future movements will depend entirely upon the results of my lecture in a business

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sense. I have come here with the intention of producing upon the American stage a play which I have written, and which I have not, for reasons, been able to produce in London. It is exceedingly desirable that it should be produced with a cast of actors who shall be thoroughly able to represent the piece with all the force of its original conception.'

" ' But,' said the reporter, ' do you not intend to produce a volume of poems while you are in America ? '

" ' No, I shall not, certainly for some time to come, publish another volume, but I hardly care to say what the future may develop.'

" ' You will certainly lecture, however ? ' said the reporter.

" ' I certainly shall, but I do not know if I shall lecture in other cities besides New York. It will depend entirely upon what encouragement I find in the acceptance of my school of philosophy.'

" ' Do you, then, call " æstheticism " a philosophy ? ' asked the reporter.

" ' Most certainly it is a philosophy. It is the study of what may be found in art. It is the pursuit of the secret of life. Whatever there is in all art that represents the eternal truth is an expression of the great underlying truth. So

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far æstheticism may be held to be the study of truth in art.'

" 'Æstheticism,' said the reporter, 'has been understood in America to be a blind groping after something which is entirely intangible. Can you, the exponent of æstheticism, give an interpretation which shall serve to give a more respectable standing to the word?'

" 'I do not know,' said Mr Wilde, 'that I can give a much better definition than I have already given. But whatever there has been in poetry since the time of Keats, whatever there has been in art that has served to devolve the underlying principles of truth; whatever there has been in science that has served to show to the individual the meaning of truth as expressed to humanity—that has been an exponent of æstheticism.' "

And so the two augurs parted, and without a smile.

Of Oscar Wilde's personal appearance at the time of his landing in New York it may be recorded that when the late Sir Henry Irving arrived in America on his first visit to the States it was generally said that he much reminded people of Wilde. In Frederic Daly's monograph, "Henry Irving," we find the following passage in the chapter describing the reception

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given to the great actor on his landing in New York :—

“ But the only unkind thing said of Mr Irving on his arrival was that he resembled Mr Oscar Wilde. ‘ The figure was muscular, as the æsthete’s was, and the face was long and a trifle like his ; but there was far more strength in it, and it was more refined and manly.’ Thus there was a dash of bitterness in Mr Irving’s first American cup, though the writer who commended the chalice to his lips was not without a desire to sweeten the draught.”

At the time of Sir Henry’s first visit to America, Oscar Wilde had not yet shown himself. He was still masquerading and mumming ; and if there is one person in the world for whom the hardworking and conscientious actor, the sincere artist, has a dislike, it is the man who acts, as an amateur, by grimace and posture on the stage of life. Oscar Wilde’s worst enemies were amongst the actors, and the spirit that prompted this resentment was not always the natural and excusable feeling that vexed Henry Irving when he, the conscientious artist, found himself compared to a man as to whom he did not then understand on what he based his claims to rank as an artist. The same feeling was shown by Coquelin the younger, who is of

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modern actors one of the most hardworking, and in "The Story of an Unhappy Friendship" we find in this connection the following reference: "I had invited him to lunch with me at Paillard's to meet Coquelin cadet. . . . Coquelin cadet was not greatly impressed by my friend; and I imagine that, as a general rule, Oscar Wilde did not have much success with actors. These may have thought his affectation, harmless as it was, an infringement on their own rights—a trespass on their domain."

When catastrophe came upon him there were two actors who most zealously worked to complete his downfall; but in both cases there was personal animosity.

It is difficult to trace any resemblance between Oscar Wilde in 1881 and Henry Irving some years later. Yet, on one occasion, one who knew both men did notice the most striking and extraordinary likeness. This man was attending one night the performance of the "Lyons Mail" in the beautiful Prince of Wales' Theatre in Birmingham. In the scene where Lesurques, having been denounced by the witnesses from the inn, makes his pathetic appeal to one of the women to speak the word which admitting her mistake shall absolve him from the horrible charge which has been brought against him,

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and the witness turns mournfully but resolutely away, Lesurques' face assumed a look of agony and horror, as the vista of what lay before him opened out—a look in which the blood rushed to the face and made it turgid and vultuous, there was at the same time a distending of the eyeballs, which seemed about to leap from their sockets, a twisting and contortion of the mouth roughly kneaded into a mass of agony by torturing hands, while the face lengthened as though by two crushing and simultaneous blows on each cheek it had been flattened downwards. The look of unspeakable anguish and dismay was cast sideways at the woman in whose silence Lesurques read his ruin, shame, and death. The spectator to whom reference has been made fell back in his chair from excess of emotion at the sight of a piece of acting so consummate. At that moment Irving presented the exact facial picture of Oscar Wilde, as looking sideways at the foreman of the jury from his place in the dock in the Old Bailey he listened to the verdict that meant to him ruin, shame, and death.

The lecture at Chickering Hall was a great success. We read in the *New York World* the following account of Oscar Wilde's *début* before the American public :—

“ It is seldom that Chickering Hall has con-

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tained so fine an audience as that which gathered there last evening (Monday, 9th January 1882) to see Mr Oscar Wilde, and to listen to his exposition of those peculiar views which have distinguished him from everyday folk in England. And Mr Wilde was well worth seeing, his short breeches and silk stockings showing to even better advantage upon the stage than in the gilded drawing-rooms, where the young apostle has hitherto been seen in New York. No sunflower, nor yet a lily, dangled from the button-hole of his coat; indeed, there is room for reasonable doubt as to whether his coat had even one button-hole to be put to such artistic use. But judging his coat by the laws of the Philistines it was a well-fitting coat and looked as though it had been made for the wearer as a real coat and not as a mere piece of decorative drapery. Promptly at eight o'clock the young lecturer came upon the stage, and with the briefest possible introduction from Colonel Morse Mr Wilde began his lecture."

In the New York review, *The Nation*, appeared at the end of that week a long article analysing the lecture and giving the impressions of the audience.¹ It was written by a representative man, who admits at the very outset of his re-

. . . ¹ Reprinted in the Appendix:

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marks that Oscar Wilde's lecture was a success. Yet his conclusion was that "Mr Wilde was essentially a foreign product and can hardly succeed in this country. What he has to say is not new, and his extravagance is not extravagant enough to amuse the average American audience. His knee-breeches and long hair are good as far as they go ; but Bunthorne has really spoiled the public for Wilde."

He was not taken seriously by many. An intimate friend of his relates that the only reference which he ever heard Oscar Wilde make to the coarse things of life was in connection with this lecture. "As soon as it was over," he said, "a number of fashionable young men who had been present, and who met me at the club to which I went that night, wished to take me out to the night-houses of New York. 'Of course,' they said, 'after lecturing on Art and Culture, you will want to go and see the girls.'"

From a commercial point of view the lecture was a decided success, and at once a proposal was made to Oscar Wilde by that enterprising lecture-agent, the late Major Pond, who offered to "run him" for a series of lectures through the States. It has been generally understood that this series of lectures was very successful, that Oscar Wilde's progress through the States

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was a triumphant one, and that the venture resulted in great financial benefit to himself and his *impresario*. Major Pond, however, himself stated, during his last visit to England and at a time when he had visited Hall Caine at Greeba Castle to endeavour to persuade the novelist to undertake a lecture-tour under his management; that Oscar Wilde's lectures had not been successful, and that he had abandoned the tour before the entire list of towns arranged for had been visited. This statement was made, however, at a time when everybody who had anything to say in detriment to Oscar Wilde was only too ready to give utterance to it. At the same time the Major was speaking to two men whom he knew to be friends of Wilde—which allows it to be supposed that he was speaking the truth; and another thing is that Major Pond had been speaking very freely about the different men whom he had "run," and the financial results which had been obtained.

The first town that Oscar Wilde visited after leaving New York was Boston, where from the very nature of the place and the bent of its inhabitants he might have been assured of a large and attentive audience. The audience was, indeed, large, but it was not a representative one. It was mainly composed of the curious who had

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been attracted by the announcement that a number of Harvard students, dressed up in a burlesque of the "æsthetic costume," intended to be present, and most probably would "guy" the lecturer. A large audience congregated to see the fun, but the prominent Bostonians stayed away. The masqueraders waited until Oscar Wilde had stepped upon the platform, and then trooped in in single file, each assuming a demeanour more absurd than that of the man who followed him. There were sixty youths in the procession, and all were dressed in swallow-tail coats, knee-breeches, flowing wigs and green ties. They all wore large lilies in their button-holes, and each man carried a huge sunflower as he limped along. Sixty front seats had been reserved for the Harvard contingent, and it was amidst shouts of laughter that they filed into their places. The effect that they had wished to produce was, however, spoiled to some extent by the fact that Oscar Wilde had for that occasion discarded his peculiar costume and appeared in ordinary evening-dress, so that those of the audience to whom his usual appearance was not familiar entirely missed the point that the Harvard students wished to make. The young men behaved with little decorum. Though they did not "guy" the lecturer, whose counter-

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manœuvre had somewhat abashed them, they took the opportunity of such pauses as occurred during the lecture when Oscar Wilde paused to drink water, to applaud in a most vigorous and derisive manner. Oscar Wilde, however, triumphed in the end, as an English gentleman always will triumph in a contest with boors. On the following day there appeared in that excellent paper, *The Boston Evening Transcript* (2nd February 1881) the following account of the lecture, which shows with what tact and success the young foreigner turned the tables on the men who had tried to discomfit him :—

“ Boston is certainly indebted to Oscar Wilde for one thing—the thorough-going chastening of the superabounding spirits of the Harvard freshman. It will be some time, we think, before a Boston assemblage is again invaded by a body of college youths, massed as such, to take possession of the meeting. This is not unimportant, for if the thing should grow into a practice and succeed, anything in the way of public entertainments here must finally be done with the leave only of the youngest and most ill-bred class of Harvard students. Whether in his first off-hand observation, or in the pointed remarks scattered through his address, or in the story he told of the Oxford boys and Mr Ruskin, nothing

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could have been more gracious, more dignified, more gentle and sweet, and yet more crushing, than the lecturer's whole demeanour to them, and its influence upon the great audience was very striking. A goodly number of the latter, it seemed to us, had gone there to see the fun, in hopes of a jolly row ; but the tide of feeling was so completely turned by Mr Wilde's courteous and kindly dignity that even this portion of the audience took sides with him, and hissed down every attempt on the part of the rougher element to disconcert or interrupt the speaker by exaggerated and ill-timed applause. Mr Wilde achieved a real triumph, and it was by right of conquest, by force of being a *gentleman* in the truest sense of the word. His nobility not only obliged *him*—it obliged his would-be mockers—to good behaviour. He crowned his triumph, and he heaped coals of fire upon those curly and wiggly heads, when he, with simplicity and evident sincerity, made them an offer of a statue of a Greek athlete to stand in their gymnasium, and said he should esteem it an honour if they would accept it. This really seemed to stun the boys, for they even forgot to recognise the offer with applause. It was a lovely though sad sight, to see those dear silly youths go out of the Music Hall in slow procession,

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hanging their heads meekly, and trying to avoid observation, followed by faint expressions of favour from their friends, but also with some hisses. A lady near us said, 'How mortified I should be if a son of mine were among them !' We think that everyone who witnessed the scene on Tuesday evening must feel about it very much as we do, and that those who came to scoff, if they did not exactly remain to pray, at least, left the Music Hall with feelings of cordial liking, and perhaps, to their own surprise, of respect for Oscar Wilde."

"Courteous and kindly dignity": that was, perhaps, the trait in Oscar Wilde's character which won him such enthusiastic friendships, and so fervent a following of admirers.

The conduct of these Harvard lads was remembered at the time when it was the popular thing to heap abuse on Oscar Wilde, and in 1895 many of the baser American prints retold the story, but gave the *beau rôle* to the lads who had been so sorely discomfited. Some Rochester students who had imitated the pranks of Harvard also came in for commendation when to have flouted Oscar Wilde at any time in his career was supposed to entitle a man to social recognition and gratitude. But Rochester did not, in fact, come off any better in the encounter

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between brains and manners with stupidity and boorishness than Harvard had done.

By his lecture and especially by his demeanour in the course of its delivery Oscar Wilde won many friends in Boston ; and that city of learning having set the seal of its high approval both on the lecturer and the lecture, the respectful attention of cultured Americans throughout the States was, at least, ensured to him. Some of the Boston ladies expressed the highest enthusiasm for the handsome young poet. Oscar Wilde's behaviour towards them only increased the respect with which he had come to be regarded.

" Oh, Mr Wilde," said to him at a reception by a young lady, " you have been adored in New York, but in Boston you will be worshipped."

" But I do not wish to be worshipped," said Oscar.

A circumstance which made for such success as he enjoyed during his lecture-tour was the support given by the Irish-Americans to the son of Speranza. Certain remarks in his lectures in which England and English society were scathingly criticised appealed strongly to this section of his audiences. " To disagree with three-fourths of all England on all points is one of the

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first elements of sanity," is one of these remarks. But for the Americans, in general, there was such praise in some of his sayings as may have satisfied the almost morbid national self-consciousness of that country. "It is rather to you," he said, in the course of his lecture on the English *Renaissance*, "that we turn to perfect what we have begun. There is something Hellenic in your air and world. You are young; 'no hungry generations tread you down,' and the past does not mock you with the ruins of a beauty, the secret of whose creation you have lost. Love art for its own sake, and then all things that you need will be added to you." The Americans called this "taffy," but they liked it.

From Boston he went to Omaha, where he lectured on "Decorative Art." In the course of the lecture he described American furniture as "not honestly made and out of character." This remark may not have pleased his audience, but it was a plain expression of the truth, and that he made it shows that he had an observant eye, and even in the matter of household furniture could tell bad workmanship from good. Only last year there was published in London a book by J. Morgan Richards, one of the keenest American business men living, who speaking

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about the various kinds of goods which American commerce had unsuccessfully tried to introduce into England, specially refers to American furniture, which he describes in almost the very words which the young æsthète used in his lecture in Omaha. When in an obituary notice of Oscar Wilde that wonderful writer, Ernest La Jeunesse, said of him, *Il savait tout* (he knew everything), he advanced a proposition which Oscar Wilde's admirers could support with numerous arguments and illustrations.

"Wherever he went in the States," says Mr Walter Hamilton, "he created a sensation, and it was gravely asserted that he had been induced to cross the Atlantic in order to work up an interest in "Patience," the *satire* of that opera not having been sufficiently understood in the States except by *reading* people. Such an idea had probably never entered his head; he is scarcely the man to condescend to become an advertising medium for a play which professes to ridicule nearly everything he holds sacred in art or poetry, but his visit did certainly have a most beneficial effect upon the success of the piece, which, beyond a certain point, had created little interest amongst middle-class Americans, whose ideas of culture are only awakened by an occasional visit to Europe." Mr Hamilton in his

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commendable enthusiasm for Oscar Wilde is here rather too severe both on the middle-class Americans and on Gilbert and Sullivan's operetta. The middle-class Americans are certainly not lacking in culture; in this respect, indeed, they show themselves superior to the middle-classes of Europe. And as to "Patience" the main idea of that amusing and inspiring piece is one which men have appreciated ever since stage-plays first existed. It is a theme which has been handled by most dramatists. It is Molière's *Tartuffe* treated in Gilbert's kindly and humane manner. It would appeal to anyone who had never heard of Oscar Wilde or of the "æsthetic movement." This slight *opera-bouffe* parodies in advance the great movement that is still going on in France—the struggle between the *intellectuels* and the military party. It is very much more than an *amusette*, though as such, thanks to Sullivan's delightful music, it takes the highest place amongst pieces of its kind.

Louisville was another city which he visited, and where he lectured on "Decorative Art." Some offence was taken here at his description of American houses as "illy designed, decorated shabbily, and in bad taste"; but on the whole the reception was a favourable one, and the local

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papers were filled with flattering articles about the lecturer.

His experiences were varied. In some cities he had a fine welcome, and a large audience; in other places he was received with indifference, or even ridicule, and the takings at the door of the lecture-hall were not sufficient to cover Major Pond's expenses. At Denver he lectured to a very rough audience, and he used to relate that the week previously a man had been shot in the public room in which he lectured there, while he had turned his back on the crowd for the purpose of examining a chromo-lithograph. "Which shows," Oscar Wilde used to add, "that people should never look at chromo-lithographs."

"From the States he went to Canada, visiting Quebec, Montreal, Ottawa, Kingston, and Toronto; in the latter city he was present at a Lacrosse match between the Torontos and the St Regis Indians, which he pronounced a charming game, quite ahead of cricket in some respects. His lecture in the Grand Opera House, Toronto, was attended by 1100 persons, and wherever he went his movements and lectures created great interest."

"Charming" was at that time his favourite word to express his approval. Later on he

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adopted the word "amazing" to describe anything very good. The opposite feeling was expressed by the word "tedious," which he retained till the end of his life.

He proceeded from Canada to Nova Scotia, lecturing at Halifax on 8th October 1882, and on the following day. The subjects of his lectures were "The Decorative Arts" and "The House Beautiful." The following account of his personal appearance was given by a writer in the *Halifax Morning Herald*, who prefaces his article by referring to the "winning and polite friendliness" with which he was received by Oscar Wilde.

"The apostle had no lily, nor yet a sunflower. He wore a velvet jacket which seemed to be a good jacket. He had an ordinary necktie, and wore a linen collar about number eighteen on a neck half-a-dozen sizes smaller. His legs were in trousers, and his boots were apparently the product of New York art, judging by their pointed toes. His hair is the colour of straw, slightly leonine, and when not looked after, goes climbing all over his features. Mr Wilde was communicative and genial; he said he found Canada pleasant, but in answer to a question as to whether European or American women were the more beautiful he dexterously evaded his

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querist : " That I cannot answer here, I shall wait till I get in mid-ocean, out of sight of both countries. Your women are pretty, especially in the South, but the prettiness is in colour and freshness and bloom, and most of your ladies will not be pretty in ten years.'

" ' I believe you discovered Mrs Langtry ? ' A look of rapture came to Oscar's face, and with a gesture, the first of the interview, he said : ' I would rather have discovered Mrs Langtry than have discovered America. Her beauty is in outline perfectly moulded. She will be a beauty at eighty-five. Yes ; it was for such ladies that Troy was destroyed, and well might Troy be destroyed for such a woman.' "

He, on that occasion, expressed his opinion that Poe was the greatest American poet ; and of Walt Whitman, he said that " if not a poet, he was a man who sounds a strong note, perhaps neither prose nor poetry, but something of his own that is grand, original and unique."

It would seem from the account of *The Morning Herald* reporter that Oscar Wilde during his Canadian tour had been dyeing his hair, for never, at any time could its natural colour have been described as the colour of straw. It was of a peculiarly rich brown, a very beautiful colour, and it was opulent and abundant. During his

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lecture-tours Oscar Wilde always carried a "make-up" box with him. As he was playing a part, he seemed to feel that he might enlist all the advantages that actors assume. The reference to the absence of gestures on his part is interesting. This struck other people who met Oscar Wilde in the States, elsewhere than on the lecture-platform. Some people malevolently spoke of it as affected languor: one very prominent American statesman used to describe a visit he paid to Oscar in his hotel in Boston, where he found him lying on a sofa smoking cigarettes, and he said that he had been most unfavourably impressed by seeing a young man in such a state of "slackness." This gentleman who was a person of very great importance in the States seems to have expected to find Oscar Wilde "hustling" round his room. It did not occur to him, nor to the other people who blamed Oscar for affected languidness, that the exertion of lecturing to large audiences night after night, in addition to the filling of innumerable social engagements, might make it necessary for the young man to rest himself whenever opportunity to do so offered itself. Poor Oscar Wilde! The simplest things he did were turned into reproaches against him. For every act of his an evil motive was uncharitably devised.

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One would fancy that he committed an unpardonable offence in ever coming into the world at all. He was accused of posturing on his very death-bed. What ferocity does great pre-eminence not arouse in the envious heart of man !

Some time after his visit to Halifax Oscar Wilde visited Walt Whitman. The meeting was not any more successful than was the meeting between him and Paul Verlaine. Oscar Wilde was "distressed" by the poverty of Walt Whitman's appearance, his shabby attire, and especially by the untidiness and squalor of the one room in which the American poet lived. The place was littered with great heaps of newspapers, for Walt Whitman collected everything that was printed about him, and these papers were strewn all over the room, and over them was so thick a coat of dust that it was impossible for any visitor to find a clean spot where to sit down. Walt Whitman, primæval, natural, aboriginal, would feel little sympathy for the dandified Hellene. One may think of a meeting between Alcibiades and Diogenes to understand the lack of sympathy that must have reigned during this memorable interview.

Oscar Wilde's great kindness of heart frequently manifested itself during this lecture-tour.

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While in Philadelphia he made great efforts to find a publisher for an American edition of the poems of a friend of his, a young Oxford man, who since has come to very high honours, and whose verse was certainly of a very high order. But at that time the young poet was unknown, and the American publishers fought shy of the expense of publishing the volume. At last one firm agreed to produce the poems provided that Oscar Wilde wrote a preface to the verse. He at once agreed to do so, and the preface which he wrote is one of the finest pieces of prose that he had written up till then. The book was printed in lamentable style ; the notions of the publishers as to what constituted the " æsthetic decoration " of a volume were curious in the extreme ; and the English poet-friend felt himself aggrieved by Oscar Wilde. After receiving the book from America he wrote a letter to Oscar putting a period to their friendship, candidly stating that his political ambitions would be balked by its continuance, and particularly chiding him for having allowed his poems to be produced in a style which could only cover their author with ridicule.

Oscar Wilde's comment on this letter was characteristic : " What he says," was his only remark, " is like a poor little linnet's cry by the

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side of the road along which my immeasurable ambition is sweeping forward." The poor man was not to know to what a goal of glory he was to reach, *per varios casus per tot. discrimina rerum*. The frantic applause of the Dresden Opera-house fell short of the lonely grave in Bagneux cemetery.

On his arrival in Chicago, where he lectured afterwards to very large audiences, he received a letter at his hotel from a young Irish sculptor who told him of the misery in which he was living, of the anguish that he, an artist, who felt himself capable of great things, suffered to be slighted and ignored in such a city as Chicago, and begged him to come to the garret which was his studio and look at his work and give him the encouragement of his praise, if praise he could find to give. Directly after receiving this letter Oscar Wilde set out for the address given by the writer, and after a hazardous excursion into the slums of Chicago found John Donoghue's abode. He stayed with him for a long time, he praised his work, he comforted him, he told him the great consolation of *l'Art pour l'Art*, and he did not leave him without commissioning him to do a piece of work. The next evening John Donoghue sitting amongst the audience in the crowded lecture-hall suddenly heard Oscar Wilde

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in the course of his lecture reproach the fashionable and distinguished men and women who were listening with rapt attention to his words with the fact that a young sculptor of undoubted genius who was living in their midst was being allowed by them in their ignorance and indifference to Art to die of hunger and that starvation which more rapidly kills the artist—the contemptuous neglect of the public. He went on to describe his visit to John Donoghue's studio ; he spoke of the beautiful things that he had seen there, of the beautiful things that this young man could do, of the honour which he could bring to the city of Chicago if only people would encourage his endeavours. The consequence was that next day John Donoghue was everywhere discussed in Chicago ; people flocked to his studio ; commissions poured in ; and after a very short while one of those munificent patrons of art who exist in America alone, as though Mæcenas had transmigrated to the States after the Fall of the Roman Empire, came forward with an offer to maintain the young man during a course of study in the *ateliers* of France and Italy. John Donoghue's artistic career was assured. He came to Europe, he studied, he prospered. But he was not a great man, nor was he a great artist. In Oscar Wilde's

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adversity he had not a word of comfort to send him, but the circumstances of his own death seem to show that in his last days he reproaches himself for his ingratitude.

Mr Walter Hamilton describes a curious incident which occurred towards the end of Oscar Wilde's tour in Nova Scotia.

"After leaving Halifax, Oscar Wilde went to lecture in several smaller towns in Nova Scotia, amongst others to Moncton, where his experiences were of a somewhat unpleasant description, owing to a misunderstanding he had with a so-called Young Men's Christian Association; it arose thus:—Two committee men had been negotiating to secure him. The Y.M.C.A. committee telegraphed to Mr Wilde's agent, offering \$75 for a lecture on Friday night. Mr Husted answered that the terms were satisfactory for Thursday night, and requested a reply. This was about 4 P.M. At about 8 P.M., four hours later, the Y.M.C.A. replied that Thursday night was satisfactory. Mr Wilde then replied in effect: 'Waited till 7, then had to close with other parties. Sorry.' Another committee of townspeople had in the meantime closed with Mr Wilde. Then the Y.M.C.A. obtained a writ which was served on Mr Wilde. The Y.M.C.A. laid damages at \$200; Mr Husted offered to

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give them \$20 and pay costs. This was not accepted. Finally, Mr Estey and Mr Weldon gave their bonds for \$500 for Mr Wilde's appearance. The action of the Y.M.C.A. is generally condemned in the colony, both by the very pious, who lift up their eyes and hands in pious horror at one who attempts to raise the love of Art and Beauty into a kind of religious worship ; and by the ungodly, who see that the Y.M.C.A. merely sought to fill its coffers out of the attraction of the Arch Prophet, irrespective of his teachings, and failing that, feed their revenge by attempts to levy blackmail."

The incident is worth recording, because it shows that Oscar Wilde's financial position towards the end of his lecturing-tour was such that he was not unwilling to accept the sum of £15 for travelling to a small town like Moncton and lecturing there, and that he had no objection to appearing under the auspices of a Young Men's Christian Association. It also shows that by this time Major Pond had determined his arrangement, for the name of Mr Wilde's agent appears to have been Husted.

Yet he did not return to New York without a substantial sum of money, and his mode of life there previous to his departure for Europe was

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such that it attracted the attention of the New York flash men. Oscar Wilde fell into the hands of the "bunco steerers." He was actually involved into playing a game of poker with some affable gentlemen whose acquaintance he had made in a casual manner. They had introduced themselves to him as having attended his lecture in Boston with great edification to themselves. The result of the friendly game was what might have been expected. Oscar Wilde was cleared out of all the cash he had in his pocket, and when he left the table he had to give a cheque for a large amount on a New York bank to settle what he owed as losses. However, not long after he had left the house where he had been fleeced it occurred to him that he had simply been swindled, and promptly drove to the bank and stopped the cheque. The men, it appeared were notorious "bunco steerers."

During his visit to America his irony did not spare the Americans, and he gave utterance to a few remarks which would not make for his popularity amongst the people against whom they were aimed. Some of these sayings he afterwards used in his plays. He was, perhaps, proudest of having defined American dry goods as the productions of the American novelists. The American novelists *lui en ont gardé une dent*.

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On a subsequent occasion he found everybody in the States reading "Robert Elsmere," and during a luncheon party in Dublin after his return from the States he described how in the trains every passenger seemed to have a cheap edition of this book in his or her hands. "As each page is finished it is torn out and flung through the window," he said, "So that in the end the American prairie will get a top-dressing of Robert Elsmere."

One disappointment had awaited Oscar Wilde in America ; he was unable to find a manager who was prepared to produce "Vera," so that in his original purpose in going to America he was not successful. "Vera" was produced about a year later in New York at a trial evening, but badly mounted, badly played, it met with so unfavourable a reception that it was instantly withdrawn. It was not a good play in the sense of a stage piece. But it certainly merited to be spoken of with more respect than in the following paragraph in *Punch*, in which Wilde's disappointment at the Adelphi was recorded. In its number for 10th December 1881 the following "Impressions Du Théâtre" appeared: "The production of Mr Oscar Wilde's play 'Vera' is deferred. Naturally no one would expect a Veerer to be at all certain : it must be, like a

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pretendedly infallible forecast, so very weather-cocky. *Vera* is about Nihilism, this looks as if there was nothing in it. But why did Mr O. Wilde select the Adelphi for his first appearance as a Dramatic Author, in which career we wish him cordially all the success he may deserve? Why did he not select the Savoy? Surely where there's a Donkey Cart—we should say D'Oyly Carte—there ought to be an opportunity for an 'Qs-car?"

"In answer to numerous inquiries we beg to state that as far as we know the Wilds of Scotland are no relation to the Wildes of Ireland.—*Ed.*"

Although he did not succeed in placing his drama, and though the lecture-tour was not as fruitful as he may have been led to expect after his triumphant reception both in New York and in Boston, this year's travelling in America was productive of the greatest good in the development of his character. Brought into daily and hourly contact with the most energetic of men, his latent energy aroused itself. He returned to Europe sharpened and stimulated to a degree that made him almost irrecongnisable. America "had taken all the nonsense out of him," if so trivial a phrase may be used in this connection. The dealings he had had with men, the struggles

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both social and commercial in which he had in the main triumphed had given him experience which years of life in London might never have afforded. His eyes had, moreover, been opened to the exact value, as an asset to a man who wishes to reach to influence and power, of the affectations which he had till then assumed. He had had, so to speak, a sound commercial training during those twelve months in America. The conclusion to which he came in the end was that it would be to his interest to discard the unworthy posturings which till then had disfigured him. He dropped his masquerade overboard into the Atlantic and never again assumed it. And here masquerade applies as much to affectation of manner and speech as to the actual disguise he had been wearing.

CHAPTER X

A Man of Moods—He goes to Paris—His Success there—Why it was not Greater—Oscar Wilde and Edmond de Goncourt—Oscar Wilde and Daudet—His Visit to Victor Hugo—His Imitation of Balzac—His Sincerity of Purpose—"The Duchess of Padua"—The History of this Play—Dr Max Meyerfeld's Version—Its Ill-fated Production in Hamburg—"The Sphinx" and "The Harlot's House"—Oscar Wilde as seen in Paris in 1883—His Fine Character—His High Morality—His Mode of Life—Oscar Wilde and Paul Bourget—Oscar Wilde's Straits—He is forced to leave Paris—"Exit Oscar!" and Edmund Yates' Reply.

OSCAR WILDE was a man of moods. He himself used to speak of these moods as periods through which he has passed. When he reached Paris in the spring of 1883 he described himself as beginning a new period of his life. He repudiated all responsibility for the Oscar Wilde of the "æsthetic movement." "That was the Oscar Wilde of the second period," he used to say, "I am now in my third period."

On returning from America, after a very short stay in London, he proceeded immediately to Paris. Here he definitely abandoned his peculiar costume. For a short time still he wore his hair long, but he had not been very many days in

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Paris before he discovered that an affectation of Bohemianism was a pose which the men of letters in France who counted had long since abandoned. Murger's heroes were entirely out of date. A transformation imposed itself, and one day he went to the *coiffeur*, from whose hands he emerged with the appearance of a gentleman in the mode of the day. He used to explain that it had been on contemplating the bust of Nero in the Louvre that he had decided that hair must not be worn long, and he used to speak of the style in which he then wore it as "my Neronian coiffure." Very shortly after his arrival in Paris Mr Theodore Child, the correspondent of *The World*, recorded the event in his journal in the following terms : " Amongst other illustrious visitors to Paris, besides the Gladstone family, we have had and still have, Oscar Wilde. Mr Wilde, is, of course, utterly unknown to the French, and does not probably intend to take any measures to make himself known. Last week he was entertained at dinner by some English and American artists and journalists, and at dessert he made a very clever little speech on his American experience. Generally speaking, Mr Wilde told us, while in America he had to converse on art with people who derived their notions of painting from chromo-lithographs,

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and their notions of sculpture from the figures in front of the tobacconist's shops. In Colorado, however, and the Rocky Mountains, Mr Wilde was agreeably surprised by the æsthetic predispositions of the natives, and at Leadville in particular, he found some of his own theories on art-police fully accepted. "When I arrived in Leadville," Mr Wilde said, "in the evening I went to the Casino. There I found the miners and pianist—sitting at a piano over which was this notice: 'Please do not shoot at the pianist, he is doing his best.' I was struck with this recognition of the fact that bad art merits the penalty of death, and I felt that in this remote city, where the æsthetic applications of the revolver were already admitted in the case of music, my apostolic task would be much simplified, as indeed it was."

Oscar Wilde had very tactfully come to the conclusion that as there was a great deal of what was ridiculous in the pretensions of the Oscar Wilde of the "second period," it would be the wisest thing to do, to laugh with his mockers, and he certainly seemed to take huge delight in bringing out the funny aspects of what he called his "apostolic task." He was full of anecdotes about his American tour, and it is a great pity that he never gave execution to the plan he had

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formed on leaving America of writing a volume of his American impressions. It would have been full of humour, and from the nature of the man the humour would have been kindly. He was bitter only against affectation and pretentiousness. The simple and kindly Americans would have been spared the lash of his satire.

The story about the pianist in Leadville was a favourite one of his, and he developed it as he repeated it. On the 5th of May of that year he was dining with Edmond de Goncourt who in his diary thus records what Oscar Wilde told him :—

“ Dined with the poet Oscar Wilde.

“ This poet, who tells the most improbable stories, gives us an amusing picture of a town in Texas, with its population of convicts, its revolver habits, its pleasure resorts, where one reads on a notice : ‘ Please not to shoot at the pianist who is doing his best.’ He tells us of the hall at the Casino, which, as it is the biggest room in the place, is used for the Assize-Court, and here they hang criminals on the stage after the performance. He told us that he had seen there a man who had been hanged clinging to the scenery uprights, while the audience fired their revolvers at him from their seats.

“ In those places, it would also appear, the

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theatrical managers look out for real criminals to play the parts of criminals, and when 'Macbeth' is to be staged and a person is wanted for the rôle of Lady Macbeth offers are made to a woman who has been convicted for poisoning, and who has just been released after serving her sentence. One sees posters thus worded : 'The part will be taken by Mrs X.,' and, in brackets, the words '(10 Years Penal Servitude).'

It may be noted that Monsieur de Goncourt did not faithfully record in his diary the things that he heard. He allowed his fine imagination to play when he sat down to his *Journal des Goncourt*. His entries have little historical value. He used to "touch up" an anecdote; he used to add to a statement of fact. He was always preoccupied as to the effect that the passage would produce on the reader. This great artist would have made the ideal city editor on a New York journal. In his diary for 1895 he records a conversation which he had with a gentleman who told him of Wilde's arrival at midnight at his mother's house in Oakley Street, after his release on bail, in a manner in which malevolence seems to have guided his pen. The gist of this page is that everybody was drunk in the house in Oakley Street, and for this statement his informant's

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narrative had not given the shadow of a suggestion.

Theodore Child was in error when he wrote that Oscar Wilde did not probably intend to take any measures to make himself known in Paris. He did take active measures. He had brought with him from London a number of copies of his volume of "Poems," and soon after he had settled down in his rooms in the Hotel Voltaire on the Quai Voltaire he sent his book accompanied by a letter to a number of leading men in Paris, both writers and painters. At the time of his trial, in many drawing-rooms this volume and the letter which had accompanied it were laid out on view, as curiosities *d'actualité*, and people were able to convince themselves of the extraordinary knowledge of French which these well-written letters displayed. His advances were favourably received—as such advances always are in humane and enlightened Paris—and many doors were opened to him. He was frequently in the exclusive society which numbered Edmond de Goncourt amongst its ornaments; he frequented the leading painters of the impressionist school; and he was welcomed at the house of Sarah Bernhardt where he met many of the most distinguished people in Paris. He was generally liked and admired, but he would certainly have

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produced a better impression in literary Paris if he had not deemed it necessary to "amaze" the Parisians by telling them stories and making statements to them, which with all their *bad-auderie* they could not accept as truthful fact. For instance, at an evening party on 21st April, Oscar Wilde speaking to Monsieur de Goncourt in the presence of a large number of highly-cultured people was heard to remark that the only Englishman who till then had read Balzac was Swinburne. Such a statement as that would appear to the people who overheard the remark, nothing more than what the French call *une blague*, and Oscar Wilde would create the impression of being *un blagueur*. Now no worse impression can be created in literary Paris than this. The Parisians have a certain reverence for the things of literature and art; they desire these things to be treated with the respect that is accorded to religion by others; and to be paradoxical and *outré* about them is to forfeit the attention of those whose good opinion it is worth while to cultivate. It is to be feared that Oscar Wilde was never really understood in Paris. A man who does not take himself seriously in Paris, as a writer or an artist, will never induce people to take him seriously. A large number of Parisians listening to Wilde's brilliant talk,

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and failing to perceive the humour which overhung his remarks simply set him down as a charlatan who was trying to deceive them, and resented the attempt. It is only since his death, since the publication of Jean Joseph-Renaud's masterly translation of "Intentions," and the writings which have appeared on "De Profundis" that the Parisian men of letters are beginning to see that they had totally misunderstood the brilliant young man who made such efforts to interest and amuse them. At the same time it is not difficult to imagine what effect must have been produced on an audience of artists in Paris when Oscar Wilde told them—a thing which he was at that time very fond of repeating—that he used to spend hours at the Louvre in rapt admiration before the Venus of Milos. Alphonse Daudet who met him in those days in Paris, both at his own house and at *soirées*, notably at the house of the famous painter of Parisian landscapes, de Nittis, conceived from hearing him talk in this manner a distrust of him which he was never able to cast off. Now Daudet was very quick at noting the salient traits in a man's character, and it shows that Oscar Wilde must have dissembled his real nature with the greatest skill, the most unfortunate ability, for he was just of that exquisite

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artistic mould which would have delighted Alphonse Daudet, while his kindness of heart and great refinement would have won for him the warm friendship of the impressionable Southerner. Daudet was deceived by Oscar Wilde's outward manner, which shows that he must have exerted great powers to dissimulate the superiority of his nature, just as others who came into contact with Daudet by a similar exertion of profound hypocrisy were able to deceive him as to their worthlessness.

At Victor Hugo's house Oscar Wilde enjoyed one evening no little success, although the master himself did not interrupt his usual nap to listen to his visitor: but it was just after Swinburne's visit to Hugo's house and the *habitués* of Hugo's salon were most interested to hear Wilde speak of the English poet. There was a lady there, a Polish princess, who had translated some of Swinburne's poems into French, who was so pleased with Oscar Wilde's eloquent championship of the poet, against whom a certain hostility reigned in that *milieu*, that she became the speaking-trumpet of the young Irishman's fame in the many good houses in Paris which she visited.

Although Oscar Wilde had laid aside his æsthetic masquerade there were certain points

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about his dress which did not please the Parisians. For one thing he used to wear fur-coats. Of these he had two or three. One was a very noticeable one, being made of green cloth with black *brandebourgs*. Now, in those days gentlemen did not wear fur-coats in Paris. It was also his habit to have his hair curled every day. There was too much "get-up" about his appearance to please the Paris men of the world. As a matter of fact, though Paris did not perceive it, Oscar Wilde was paying to French literature the compliment of modelling himself on the great writer Balzac. He was then in a period of imitation of this great writer for whom his admiration increased with each year of his life. When at work at the Hotel Voltaire he used to put on a white gown with a monkish cowl, because it was in a dressing-gown like this that Balzac, who wrote mostly at nights, used to work. At the time when Balzac, who had doomed himself for years to celibacy and continence, at last went courting, the recluse assumed all the graces of the contemporary Parisian dandy. He wore the most elegant costumes, he adorned himself with jewellery, and he carried when he went abroad a walking-stick which was so noticeable that it inspired Delphine Gay with the subject of a novel, "La

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Canne de Monsieur de Balzac." In all these points Oscar Wilde imitated the master with whose industry and enthusiasm for literary art he was endeavouring to imbue himself. He dressed much after the fashion of the fops of 1848, he wore noticeable jewellery, and he carried a stick which was the replica of Balzac's *canne*. This was a stick of ivory with the pommel set with turquoises. The costume was the outward sign of a very laudable effort. It can be to nothing but the credit of any writer to wish to imitate Balzac ; and if by adopting his peculiarities a man might hope to attain to any degree of his powers of production and style, one would like to see the whole Republic of Letters curled as to the hair, bejewelled, clad in 1848 costumes, and carrying ivory sticks with turquoise-stone pommels. But Paris did not understand the suggestion of Oscar Wilde's dress, and did not believe that a man who seemed to talk so flippantly had any real artistic strivings in him. Oscar forgot that not any more in Paris than in London, in London than in Berlin, are men prone to a charitable interpretation of any act of fellow man. He was labelled a *poseur* when he was only trying by dressing a part to enter into the very spirit of the man whom he wished to imitate in his excellent qualities.

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Many of the greatest actors which the stage has ever produced would have failed utterly to represent the parts in which they most triumphed, had they not been allowed to "dress the parts." Paris might have understood this, but preferred to disbelieve that any such strivings animated the young man. Yet at that very time he was actually inspiring himself from Balzac's example, and at no period in his life, except, perhaps, when he was writing "De Profundis," did he more sternly discipline himself to that constant labour which, as Balzac said, is the law of art. During those months at the Hotel Voltaire he wrote that great play "The Duchess of Padua," which some of his admirers rank with the Elizabethan masterpieces. This play was originally written for Mary Anderson, and while Oscar was yet in Paris the manuscript was sent to her for her perusal. She declined it, greatly to the author's secret discomfiture. Mary Anderson probably saw that it was not likely to succeed as a play for the stage. This opinion proved itself in the event to be a right one. The "Duchess" has been tried twice in two different languages and has failed each time. The first performance was given in New York in the early nineties. It gained a great *succès d'estime*, but it never came to be considered a paying piece. Only last year

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negotiations were being made between a beautiful young American actress, who was anxious to mount the play and take the part of the Duchess, and a lady who owns the American acting rights. The negotiations fell through on other grounds but those of terms; and when it is recorded that the only fee demanded by the holder of the copyright for the right of performance was five pounds a week, it will be understood at what a low figure the financial possibilities of the play were estimated in the American theatrical world. But the play for all that had warm admirers. Indeed, it was at the suggestion of her mother that the young American actress referred to above had desired to mount the "Duchess of Padua." In a letter to one of Oscar Wilde's friends this lady wrote:—

"Many years ago I saw a performance (in New York) of Oscar Wilde's play 'The Duchess of Padua' with Laurence Barrett and Mina Gale in the leading rôles. The play made a decided impression on me, and I have often wondered why it has not been revived."

This play has not been published in England, but an excellent German translation by Doctor Max Meyerfeld of Berlin appeared more than a year ago. This version was produced in December 1904 at one of the leading theatres in

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Hamburg. It was not a success, and after three nights was withdrawn. It cannot be said that justice was done to it, nor that it had a fair trial. The translation is excellent. Doctor Meyerfeld has rendered Oscar Wilde's verse in German verse of quite equal merit, nor has he in any way sacrificed the original to the necessities of translation. The German play is in itself a fine piece of literature. The acting was, however, deplorable. The man who played the part of Guido was suffering from influenza, and for this reason made a burlesque of the last act. In this act the great scene is where the Duchess finding Guido asleep in his prison addresses him in impassioned language. The Duchess's fine tirade was at the Hamburg theatre constantly interrupted by the snuffing, sneezing, and coughing of the sleeping hero. The Duchess was herself by no means word-perfect. But the climax of misfortune was reached on the night of the third performance when the actor who played the part of the Cardinal suddenly went mad on the stage and had to be removed *vi et armis* to a lunatic asylum. The Official Receiver in Oscar Wilde's bankruptcy then intervened, questioning the right of the poet's literary executors to give Dr Meyerfeld the right to produce the play in Germany; and under the circumstances the

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Doctor thought it advisable to withdraw it from the stage.¹

His version was enthusiastically reviewed in *The Daily Chronicle* by William Archer, who saluted Oscar Wilde as having revealed himself in this play a dramatic poet of very high rank. It was this play which Oscar Wilde was writing at the time when the Paris men of letters were regarding him with suspicion as a literary charlatan. As an artist, and as an intellect, there were not more than three men in the Paris literary world of that day who were the equals of this literary charlatan. Some of his finest verse was also written at this time, notably "The Sphynx," over which he laboured with the application of Flaubert, but perhaps with better results. This piece has been published several times. The original edition was issued in a beautiful form in September 1894 by Messrs Elkin Matthews and John Lane. It is a masterpiece of the poetry which is not spontaneous. The inspiration came from Poe through Baudelaire. Both these poets were at that time exercising upon Oscar Wilde as strong an influence as in another way was Balzac. In the "Harlot's

¹ "The Duchess of Padua" was revived early this year in Berlin. It was killed by the critics, and its ill-fated performance resulted in a heavy financial loss to the devoted Meyerfeld.

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House,” a poem which he wrote at the same time, Oscar Wilde was more himself. As to the publication of this poem we find in the excellent bibliography which is appended to the translation of André Gide’s monograph on Wilde the following note :—“ The original publication of ‘ The Harlot’s House ’ has not yet been traced. The approximate date is known by a parody on the poem, called ‘ The Public House,’ which appeared in *The Sporting Times* of 13th June 1885. In 1904 a privately printed edition, on folio paper, with five illustrations by Althea Gyles, was issued by the Mathurin Press, London. In 1905 another edition was privately printed in London, 8 pp., wrappers.” It was a short lyrical poem. The poet is standing in the street outside the house of the Scarlet Woman and looks up at the windows of which the blinds are drawn down. It is night, and on the blinds appear the “ silhouettes ” of the dancing figures, the “ marionettes ” within. In this poem Oscar Wilde overcame his objection to the use of words ending in “ ette ” for which he professed a real artistic horror. The last lines of the poem in which he speaks of the dawn fleeing down the street like a frightened girl are very beautiful. Perhaps the tone of the whole thing, like that of “ The Sphynx,” is not “ robust,” but, as we

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have said, Oscar Wilde was then impregnated with the essence of Baudelaire's *Fleurs du Mal*.

To those who came to know him intimately in those days in Paris he appeared one of the most gifted as also one of the best of men. He was then in the height of his intellectual powers. The fiend of his insanity never betrayed its presence by the faintest indication. His refinement and chastity of speech and life seemed to show how well he had schooled himself in the example of the great artist whom he had set up above him as his master. He was the most delightful companion that a man could meet. More than personal magnetism emanated from his joyous personality. Men used to wonder what this quality was in him that seemed to stimulate in those who came near him every desirable faculty. To-day, when the scientists speak of radio-activity, men might wonder whether in human beings also this principle did not exist so that such men as possess this quality can as readily affect those who approach them as substances which are brought into the proximity of radium are affected. A distinguished man was heard to wonder whether there be not sexes of the intellect. "Most men would then appear to have female intellects; the very rare, the geniuses, having male intellects. From the con-

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tact of the two, great thoughts spring off. I know," he added "that my brain never seems to live nor to be so fertile as it does when I am in the company of Oscar Wilde." His geniality was another trait that endeared him to all who saw him in private life. His joyousness of life was as exhilarating as a draught of generous wine. He seemed a happy man. His happiness made others feel the folly of despondency and pessimism. His gratitude to his Maker for his creation was revealed in the intense delight he took in every little thing that is good and pleasant in the world. As to his morality we read in "The Story of an Unhappy Friendship." "The example of his purity of life in such a city as Paris, of his absolute decency of language, of his conversation, in which never an improper suggestion intruded, the elegance and refinement which endowed him, would have compelled even the most perverse and dissolute to some restraint. The companionship of Oscar Wilde, in the days in which I lived in his intimacy, would have made a gentleman, at least outwardly, of a man of bad morals and unclean tongue."

He used to live in great luxury, dining every evening, when he had money, at the most fashionable Parisian restaurants. He preferred Bignon's in the Avenue de l'Opéra, but he some-

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times went to the Café de Paris, which was quite as expensive, or, when he felt inclined for the Latin Quarter, to Foyot's or to Lavenue's. At this last place he used to meet John Sargent the painter, and Paul Bourget; and in the album at that café John Sargent one day sketched his portrait with that of Bourget and another friend. With Bourget he had some relationship, and the two used frequently to meet at the Café d'Orsay, which has long since disappeared. Although Bourget has never written anything about Wilde it was obvious in those days that he was impressed by the man's genius; his constant deference and the things which he said about him were proof of that.

He was not always prosperous. The funds which he had brought with him from America, not a large amount, had been exhausted; his work produced nothing, and his expenses were heavy. His resources during that period in Paris were derived from the final disposal of his property in Ireland. There was a small estate called the Red Island which at that time was being melted into gold. There were times when he was very pressed for money, when the fashionable restaurants had to be abandoned. During these periods he used to take his meals in his hotel, and it was at his hotel that with no

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splendour he was forced to entertain the poet, Rollinat, for whose book "La Main de Troppmann" he professed a great admiration. The *macabre* was then greatly preoccupying his mind, but that it never corrupted his bounding optimism his whole subsequent career establishes.

Mary Anderson's refusal of the "Duchess of Padua" was a great disappointment to him. He had hoped from the proceeds of that play to be able to continue his luxurious life of literary activity in Paris. But, as there was nothing to be looked for from this source, and as the lawyers in Ireland declared it impossible to squeeze any more gold out of the barren acres of the Red Island, the Paris days had to be brought to an end. He returned to England in the summer of 1883 under the necessity of finding a means of gaining his livelihood. An important journal then published an article concerning his position, achievements and prospects, the tone of which is best explained by the title under which it appeared: "Exit Oscar." Edmund Yates rebutted this article in the next number of *The World*, and said that in any case Oscar's exit was a very brilliant one after the great artistic and social successes which he had enjoyed in Paris. The fact was, however, that his position at that time was a very difficult one. Yet with

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great courage and a never-failing dignity he faced the situation, and, in the event, came through it triumphantly. An American firm of lecture-agents which had a branch in London approached him immediately on his return to London and, having no option in the matter, he came to terms with them. It was under their auspices that he lectured one afternoon in the Prince's Hall, Piccadilly, before a moderate audience. He was at that time living in two small rooms at the top of a house in Charles Street, Grosvenor Square. To outward appearance he was very prosperous, and must have continued to stir the gall of the envious. He smoked Parascho cigarettes, and was sometimes to be seen dining in the grill-room of the Café Royal with Whistler. But the meal was ever a frugal one, and the wine which accompanied the modest grill was always a claret chosen from the very top of the list.

CHAPTER XI

Oscar Wilde on the Lecture-Platform—His Provincial Audiences—What the People hoped to see—What they saw—And heard—Two Pen Pictures by Provincials—How People of Refinement considered him—The Opinion of a Distinguished Woman—Oscar Wilde released from this Penance—His Marriage with Constance Lloyd—The Extraordinary Wedding—Dresses—The Foreboding of Certain—Oscar Wilde's New Home—His Straightened Circumstances—Some Fine Writings—His Failure as a Lecturer—The Dublin Fiasco—A Prophet in his own Country—The Caution of *The Freeman's Journal*—The Wildes' Poverty—His Two Sons.

IMMEDIATELY after the lecture in the Prince's Hall Oscar Wilde commenced to visit various provincial towns in different parts of the kingdom to give his address on "The House Beautiful," under a contract with a firm of lecture-agents. The labour was not distasteful to him, and the fees earned in this way were at that time his sole resource. He was so poor in the autumn of 1883 that he was frequently obliged to have recourse to the pawnbrokers, and just before his first lecture in London, a friend accompanied him to Marlborough Street Police Court to swear to the loss of a pawn-ticket before the magistrate. The same friend remembers a day, at about the

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same time, when he was entirely devoid of funds, and for once, at least, could have written himself down, *impransus*, as he retired to bed. Under no other circumstances would he have brought himself to associate his name with the enterprise of those provincial lectures, so clear was it made to him that its success was expected not from the value and the interest of the address, but from the notoriety attaching to his name as the eccentric "æsthete." The great majority of the people who came to his lectures paid the entrance fee with no other purpose than to stare at the man who was reported to have a strange passion for sunflowers and lilies. Everybody had heard of "the æsthetic movement," very few even knew the meaning of the adjective.

It was to imbeciles of this calibre that this scholar was forced by his necessity to discourse. His lectures were not successful in any degree, nor can the speculation have been a very profitable one to the agents who had engaged upon it. People were vastly disappointed to find that his appearance, dress, and manners were no different from those of any gentleman. The advertisements of these lectures which appeared in some provincial town were calculated to arouse the highest expectations of the morbidly curious. A show was promised ; the subject-matter of the

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lecture was not referred to. On certain newspaper files in different parts of the country one may still read display advertisements, running down whole columns, after some such fashion of vulgarity as this :—

HE IS COMING!!!

HE IS COMING!!!

HE IS COMING!!!

WHO IS COMING???

WHO IS COMING???

WHO IS COMING???

OSCAR WILDE!!!

OSCAR WILDE!!!

OSCAR WILDE!!!

THE GREAT ÆSTHETE!!!

THE GREAT ÆSTHETE!!!

THE GREAT ÆSTHETE!!!

It was in this way that it was brought to the public notice that a gentleman of rare scholarship and great erudition designed to address a meeting on a subject on which, at least, from a careful study of its masters and extensive reading and observation he was adequately qualified to speak. One day in Charles Street one of his friends picked up a provincial newspaper which

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was lying on his table. Oscar Wilde, whose manners were always gentle and urbane, flushed red, and violently snatched it from his hands. "Do not look at that!" he cried, crushing the paper up and flinging the ball into the fire. His friend, had, however, noticed an advertisement similar in tone to the one of which a part is given above. Nobody felt more keenly the degradation of these exhibitions than the potential author of "The Soul of Man Under Socialism" himself. Although his want of money was pressing at this time he indignantly refused to appear in "æsthetic costume," in spite of the fact that for such an additional attraction a much higher fee would have been paid to him. In view of his refusal the agents, who were well aware that it was the person of Oscar Wilde and not at all what he might have to say about beautiful houses that would attract the sight-seers of the provinces, were obliged to conceal the fact that no spectacle was to be afforded. The references to "the great æsthete" in the advertisements contained the suggestion that something laughable was to be on exhibition, and when the audience discovered that instead of watching the antics, and listening to the patter, of a buffoon, they were expected to lend ear to a disquisition delivered by a scholar which

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invited their minds to ascend to a plane of inaccessible height they were not slow to express their disappointment and disapproval. On several occasions the room emptied itself during the progress of the lecture.

It will be of interest to put on record here—in spite of the vulgarity of their style—two pen-pictures of him drawn at the time in different places by two provincial journalists, for they will show first what the audience had expected to see, and secondly how they were impressed by his appearance and delivery. They are representative of opinions expressed throughout the country.

This is the first :—

“ We were informed by the advertisement pamphlet that this gentleman has, since the publication of his book of poems in 1890, devoted his time to public addresses. So, as poets do not often come before the public personally, we were natural'y anxious to see what a poet-lecturer was like. With imaginary visions of celebrated poets in mind we were anxiously awaiting the appearance of Mr Wilde upon the platform, when the curtain was drawn asunder, and in walked not a Tennyson, but a Long-fellow. For the first *quart d'heure* we could not erase the impression from our minds that the subject of the lecture was not ‘ the house beautiful,’ but ‘ the man beautified.’ This *cheveux de frise*—he gets very warm on the subject of friezes—proved at a glance how highly the lecturer estimated the power of capillary attraction, for his head seemed surrounded with a perfect halo of artificially-arrayed curls, which, if removable, would doubtless fetch a figurative sum at an auction sale as a most admirable substitute for a lady's bonnet. Joking apart, no gentleman would contradict a lady who said that Mr Wilde could rejoice in the

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possession of a hairy head which at once stamps him as a master of artistic decoration. His collar had evidently been made to an original design, which has no doubt been deposited at South Kensington and the pattern patented, or it must have been in the market long ago. His necktie was neither tied nor untied, but, like the clerical collar, puzzled one to know where it began and how it ended. His cuffs were equally æsthetic and 'took one by the collar.' Mr Wilde's theory as to the harmonious arrangement of colours in art decoration is that our backgrounds should consist of tertiary or neutral tints, relieved by small objects or ornaments of rich primary colour or bright appearance. The man beautified was accordingly arrayed in the neutral tints of black and white, with the rich relief in the shape of a red silk handkerchief peeping out from the left side of his vest, and a massive watch-chain pendant, which appeared like the name-label on a bunch of keys, inasmuch as no one else had one just like it. In (not on) those marvellous members of the human body, the hands, were held a pair of white silk gloves, which if the owner did not know to be useful at all events *felt* to be beautiful. Tall and graceful, and presenting a youthful appearance, he delivers his lecture with clear, distinct articulation, never hesitating for a word, nor striving after flights of eloquence, but handling his subject with an amount of assurance and self-possession that gives you the impression that he must be quite as high an authority as Morris or Ruskin, whom he quotes to agree or disagree with. . . . The closing part of his lecture on art education drew forth repeated applause, and, in fact, the whole of it was sufficiently interesting to gain for him unbroken attention during the hour and a half which his lecture occupied."

This is how the second provincial journalist wrote :—

"Oscar Wilde, the æsthetic—the ineffable—the exponent of the principle of eternal loveliness has visited us and is—*human*. He is not an angel after all! Nor is he a deity springing to us out of the dark past. His food must have been other than the nectar'd sweets the poets love to write about; in fact he can be seen, and heard, and handled, for he is a—man. This revelation will come as an unwelcome surprise to many. One so delightfully out of sympathy with

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the age, with such ineffable yearnings towards the romantic past, with such inexpressible aspirations towards the beauteous future, when the essential ugliness of to-day shall only be remembered as a hideous dream, such a man cannot be—ought not to be—one of us. So I am sure many think. I believe it was Mrs Browning who describes how sad we feel when we find our cherished idols simply to be clay ; but I can confess to no such revelation of feeling when Mr Oscar Wilde stepped on to the platform and I discovered he had no wings. Mr Oscar Wilde is tall, well-proportioned, with a poet's hair, and—shall I say it—a mildly epicurean countenance. In his appearance there was nothing Byronic, or Bulwerian, or Carlylean, or Ruskinian ; a little that savoured of Count d'Orsay, Beau Brummel, and more that suggested the traditional diner-out. His dress had few peculiarities, being ordinary evening-dress, a very wilderness of shirt-front, relieved by a half-concealed scarlet handkerchief, deftly placed inside his vest. His pose and manner might have been artistic, but were not particularly effective. His voice is a moderately pleasing one, with an occasional lisp to give it an aristocratic tone. His action—what little there was of it—was striking. He spoke entirely extempore, not even availing himself of the use of notes. For very much more than an hour he addressed his audience. There was no hesitation, and there was no fire. Only once there was an approach to pathos, and as far as I could detect only one quotation from the poets, excepting an extract he gave in the form of a letter—I think—of John Keats. He came to speak to us on an important subject. And here I must say, that if his lecture had been called the 'Home Beautiful,' instead of the 'House Beautiful,' I should have been better pleased. Englishmen—especially such as would go and hear such a discourse as Oscar Wilde's—do not care much for their "houses," they care everything for their homes. An Englishman never says he is going to his 'house,' but always that he is going 'home.' A house to an Englishman is an empty building. The same building filled with furniture, and all sorts of lovely things—plus wife and children—becomes a home."

On people of refinement the impression produced was, of course, a different one. Many

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people in many parts of the country remembering him as he appeared to them twenty-two years ago speak regretfully of his fate. Over women his personality seems to have exercised a great influence. "I can remember him," writes a lady of refinement and culture from a Midland town, "as though I had seen him yesterday. My mother was delighted with his appearance; she often afterwards spoke of his hair and his hands and his tie—oh! his tie, how it impressed us all. For my part, though I was only a girl then, I felt he was saying things which nobody present could understand, and it seemed to me at times as though he knew it also. I felt it was a pity he should have had to come here at all, for I suppose it was necessity that drove him on to the lecture-platform. Many of the things he said have remained familiar in my mind ever since. I never see a big curtain-pole without thinking of what he said about the sins of the upholsterer, and I know that I never drink a cup of tea at a railway refreshment-room without remembering how he described the cup out of which he drank his coffee at the hotel in San Francisco, where he contrasted the crockery of the Chinese in the Chinese quarter of that city, with the domestic vessels used by the Europeans. It was a real distress to me to sit in that lecture-room

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looking at this wonderful youth and listening to his profound and beautiful words, while the rest of the audience were either gazing with dismay and surprise, or showing how bored they were. The room was not half-full to begin with, and during the whole course of the lecture people kept getting up and going out. But he seemed quite indifferent to the mood of his audience, his manner, if I may use the term in such a connection, was quite business-like. It was as if he was saying to himself, 'I am here to say certain things, and I shall go on speaking until I have said them.' He began speaking the moment he came on the stage, and when he had said his last word he walked off as if anxious to catch a train and get away from us all."

Those amongst his provincial audiences who listened to him, and who attempted to be critical, were in the habit of saying that his weakness as a lecturer was in a tendency to exaggeration. Some Joseph Prud'homme of the provinces sagely remarked: "He pronounces as *dicta*, with the authority of an oracle, principles which are essentially debateable."

The most favourite criticism, however, of Oscar Wilde's lecture on "The House Beautiful"—a criticism which can be found in similar phraseology in contemporary prints all over the

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country, and not in the provinces alone—was to the effect that : “ Mr Oscar Wilde seems to ignore the deeply-rooted prejudice that æstheticism if not symbolic of weakness and effeminacy, is, at least, the antithesis of that moral and intellectual robustness which we, in this age, are accustomed to respect.”

From this bondage, from these chains, which to such an artist must have been galling indeed, Oscar Wilde was to be rescued by the gentle and beautiful Constance Lloyd. To her for some time past he had been paying attentions ; it was during the course of his lecture-tour that he was able to visit Dublin and ask her to become his wife. Constance Lloyd admired him and loved him ; she put her hand into his. She was wealthily connected ; she was assured of a good income on her marriage by her grandfather, who had instituted her to be his heiress. The marriage took place on the 29th of May 1884 ; we find the following announcement of it in *The Times* for 31st May : “ On 29th May, at St James’s Church, Paddington, by the Rev. Walter Abbott, Vicar, Oscar, younger son of the late Sir William Wilde, M.D., of Dublin, to Constance Mary, only daughter of the late Horace Lloyd, Esq. Q.C.” Edmund Yates gave a friendly notice of the occurrence in *The World* for 4th

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June 1884 :—" Mr Oscar Wilde's wedding went off with more simple effect than the large crowd who thronged the church had possibly come out to see. Owing to the illness of Mr John Horatio Lloyd, the bride's grandfather, the ceremony was meant to be of rather a private character, and only the near relatives were asked to meet at Lancaster Gate after the service. There is only this much to be recorded about it: that the bride, accompanied by her six pretty bridesmaids, looked charming; that Oscar bore himself with calm dignity; and that all most intimately concerned in the affair seemed thoroughly pleased. A happy little group of *intimes* saw them off at Charing Cross." Yet the baroque and the bizarre were not wanting in this wedding which sealed a union which was to end in such unhappiness. It appeared that Oscar Wilde felt it incumbent on him as a "Professor of Æsthetics" to give such directions as to the dresses of his bride and bridesmaids as might impress the onlookers with the fact that it was no ordinary wedding that they were attending. A brief description of these dresses will establish this suggestion. "The bride's rich creamy satin dress was of a delicate cowslip tint; the bodice, cut square and somewhat low in front, was finished with a high Medici collar;

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the ample sleeves were puffed ; the skirt, made plain, was gathered by a silver girdle of beautiful workmanship, the gift of Mr Oscar Wilde ; the veil of saffron-coloured Indian silk gauze was embroidered with pearls and worn in Marie Stuart fashion ; a thick wreath of myrtle leaves, through which gleamed a few white blossoms, crowned her fair frizzed hair ; the dress was ornamented with clusters of myrtle leaves ; the large bouquet had as much green in it as white. The six bridesmaids were cousins of the bride. Two dainty little figures, that seemed to have stepped out of a picture by Sir Joshua Reynolds, led the way. They were dressed in quaintly-made gowns of Surah silk, the colour of a ripe gooseberry ; large pale yellow sashes round their waist ; the skirts falling in straight folds to the ankles displayed small bronze, high-heeled shoes. Large red silk Gainsborough hats decked with red and yellow feathers shaded the damsels' golden hair ; amber necklaces, long yellow gloves, a cluster of yellow roses at their throats, a bouquet of white lilies in their hands, completed the attire of the tiny bridesmaids. The four elder bridesmaids wore skirts of the same red Surah silk, with over-dresses of pale blue *mousseline de laine*, the bodices made long and pointed ; high crowned hats trimmed with

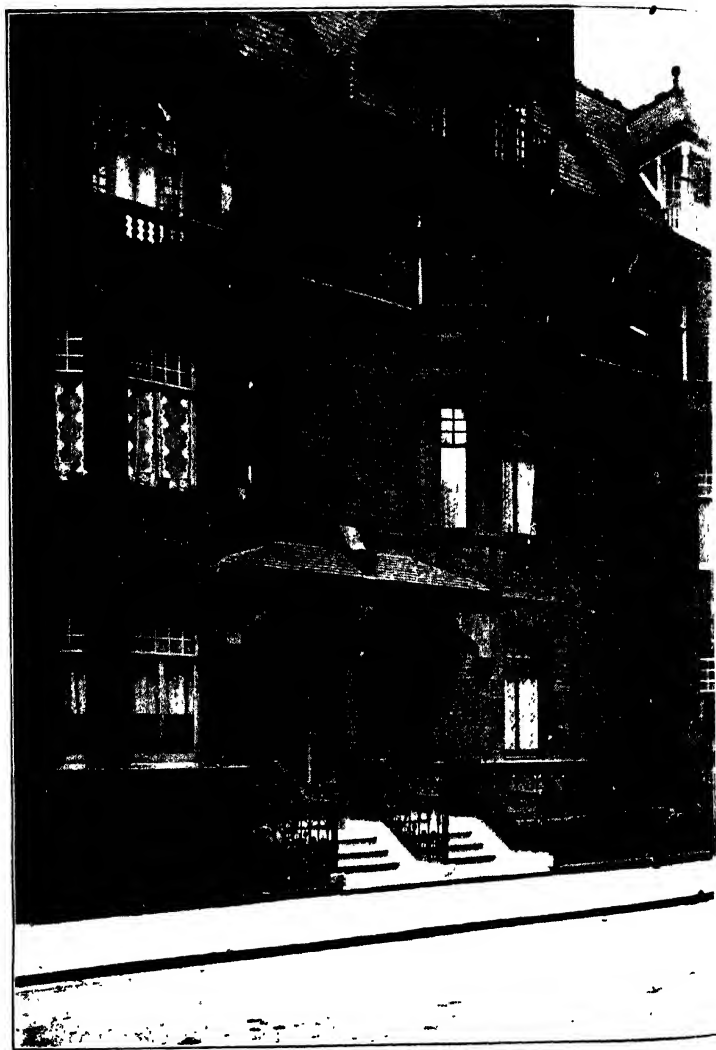


Photo by Ruchgilt.

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16, THE STREET.

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cream-coloured feathers and red knots of ribbon, lilies in their hands, amber necklaces and yellow roses at their throats made up a sufficiently picturesque *ensemble*. One of the ladies present wore what was described as a "very æsthetic costume." It was composed of "an under-dress of rich red silk with a sleeveless smock of red plush, a hat of white lace trimmed with clusters of red roses under the brim and round the crown." This gaudy and displeasing picture must be recalled. It proves as nothing else could prove the entire confidence of Constance Lloyd in the artistic pretensions of her husband. No woman who was not blindly convinced of the superiority of her bridegroom's taste would have consented to such a masquerade. It may have occurred to some of the on-lookers that a union so initiated could not contain the elements of happiness. Where the woman is entirely hypnotised and subjugated her marriage is not often a happy one for her.

On the day of his wedding Oscar Wilde took his young wife over to Paris, and the first weeks of the honeymoon were spent in that city. They occupied a suite of rooms at the Hotel Wagram in the rue de Rivoli. They both seemed to be radiantly happy. Oscar was a gallant and de-

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voted husband, and Constance seemed to be swathed in rapturous delight. If ever her husband left her alone to go out with any friend, a few minutes after his departure a messenger would arrive at the hotel bearing for the bride a bouquet of exquisite flowers together with a note couched in language of such impassioned adoration that it charmed her solitude and made her happy even though her loved one was away.

Mrs Wilde's dowry enabled the young couple to take the lease of a good house in Tite Street, Chelsea, which was the last home of his own that Oscar was to possess. It was decorated under the direction of Whistler, and was substantially furnished. At the very top of the house a work-room had been installed for Oscar Wilde, the furniture of which was painted red. But he never used this room. The little writing that he ever did at home was done in a small study which was to the right of the entrance passage. Mrs Wilde's income at that time was not large—she did not come into her grandfather's fortune until much later, and it became immediately necessary for Oscar to find remunerative employment. He turned to journalism for livelihood, and he accepted occasional engagements on the lecture-platform. He was a constant contributor of anonymous work to

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The World and *The Pall Mall Gazette*. Much of his writings at this time have been traced, and were recently being hawked round the London publishing-houses by speculators in his notoriety. It was a disservice to his reputation, it would appear, which would concern these literary resurrection-men but little. The work was poor ; it was, the hack-work, *currente calamo*, of a man who had no heart in his labours ; and " poorer stuff," said one London publisher to whom this volume was offered, " I never read in my life." Yet at the same time he was writing those exquisite fairy-stories, which were afterwards republished in a volume by David Nutt. " The Happy Prince and Other Tales " (1888) ; a volume which many of his admirers look upon as his best and most characteristic prose work. There are no fairy-stories in the English language to compare with them. The writing is quite masterly ; the stories proceed from a rare and opulent imagination ; and while the tales that are told interest the child no less than the man of the world there underlies the whole a subtle philosophy, an indictment of society, a plea for the disinherited, which make of this book and of the " House of Pomegranates " (1891) two veritable *requisitoires* against the social system, as crushing as " The Soul of Man." And yet

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as one reads these tales the lesson that the author wishes to teach never forces itself upon him. Unlike Lewis Carroll and Hans Andersen Oscar Wilde tells a story which a child can read with pleasure and interest, and without that uncomfortable feeling that moral medicine is being administered to him in literary preserves. If Oscar Wilde had had hopes that the lecture-platform would afford a source of income to him he was doomed to disappointment. In January 1885 he delivered at the Gaiety, Dublin, under the management of Mr Michael Gunn, two afternoon lectures. The first, given on the afternoon of Monday, 5th January, was on "Dress" (Beauty—Taste—Ugliness in Dress); and the second, on Tuesday, treated of "The Value of Art in Modern Life." Of both these lectures a *résumé* appears at the end of this volume. The enterprise was a disastrous failure. Dublin was indifferent to the son of Speranza, indifferent to the son of Sir William Wilde, indifferent to the brilliant Trinity College man who had so distinguished himself and his country at Oxford, and to the poet and lecturer who had set two worlds talking. We find in *The Freeman's Journal* for 6th January the following prefatory remarks to its notice of the lecture on "Dress" :—

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“ Although the fact of the lecture taking place was fully announced for days in advance the attendance was hardly satisfactory. At most, about 500 persons were present, chiefly in the dress circle and stalls. But the audience though not large was highly intelligent, critical and appreciative of the matter and style of the lecturer. Evidently people have ceased to regard Mr Wilde as the eccentric apostle of a momentarily fashionable craze, to be seen, heard and laughed at.”

A highly appreciative account of the lecture followed, but that afternoon the attendance was very much smaller. Possibly the high prices charged for admission frightened the public. Mr Gunn was asking 21s., 30s., and 42s. for private boxes, and proportionate prices for the rest of the house. At that time *matinée* performances of a pantomime were being given at the Gaiety, and it is related that a gentleman accompanied by two boys came by mistake into the theatre, sat down and listened patiently for some time to Oscar's discourse, and finally got up exclaiming: “ What's all this? When's the pantomime going to begin? ” In the following month there appeared in *The Dublin University Review*, of all publications the one in which the greatest deference ought to have been paid to

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the Berkeley Medallist, son of Sir William Wilde, and a frequent contributor to its pages, two sarcastic and cutting notices of his lecture. These are they :—

“ We confess that before a visit to the Gaiety Theatre dispelled the illusion we had thought that the re-appearance of Mr Oscar Wilde before a Dublin audience would have excited very general interest among his fellow-citizens. Indeed, in spite of the fact that Mr Wilde, like the elephant Jumbo, with whose notoriety his popularity was contemporaneous, has ceased to attract the sympathy and the shillings of the public, we feel bound to express our belief of the talents of that gentleman, and our regret that they have not latterly been more usefully employed. The indifference with which the lecturer was received cannot fairly be ascribed to any falling off in the quality of the lectures, which formed not only a complete exposition of Mr Wilde’s peculiar philosophy of art, but were in themselves instructive and suggestive. However, a few more lectures as unfortunate, from a commercial point of view, as those recently delivered in this city will materially remedy this defect, and will help to restore Mr Wilde to public favour. Meanwhile he will not regret the decrease on his receipts, for as

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he stated in his second lecture : ' True Art is economical.' "

In the same number of the official organ of T.C.D. appears a letter on Sir Noel Paton's picture "Lux in Tenebris." "It is pretty enough," says the writer, "but it no more realises the idea of a spiritual light shining in the moral darkness of the world than would, let us say, a picture of Mr Oscar Wilde preaching about dress-improvers at the Gaiety."

This was Dublin's salute to the most talented man to whom she had ever given birth. For the rest, although in Ireland one finds little of that horror against the mention of Oscar Wilde's name which still lingers in England, in certain quarters, where one would least expect to find it, it persists. In the summer of last year a gentleman being desirous of purchasing a photograph of Oscar Wilde as a child, and of getting information as to the early life of Speranza, sent an advertisement embodying his requirements to *The Freeman's Journal*, where, if anywhere in Ireland, Lady Wilde's memory ought to have been revered. The advertisement was eventually inserted, but not for several days, during which the manager was communicating with the editor—the acting-editor not having dared to assume so grave a responsibility—as to whether

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an advertisement referring to Lady Wilde and her son could be allowed to appear in the journal !

Mr Whistler's attack on Oscar Wilde—the details of which can be found set out in "The Gentle Art of Making Enemies"—did much to reduce still lower any chances of success as a lecturer which remained to Oscar Wilde. Whistler made it public that Oscar Wilde's lecture on the English *Renaissance* was mainly made up from facts and opinions which he, Whistler, had supplied to the lecturer. It would have been just as easy for that admirable actor, Hermann Vezin, to have rushed into print and to have declared that Oscar's manner on the stage was the result of some training in elocution and gesture which he had given him before he commenced his lecture-tour. But then Hermann Vezin is not only a great artist, he is a true and loyal friend. This source of income having failed there were periods of real poverty in the elegant house in Tite Street. A lady who lived near the Wildes has recorded that at that time she was frequently called upon by Mrs Wilde to lend her money, even small sums such as the purchase of a pair of boots might demand. At the same time the expenses of the *ménage* were increasing. In June 1885 and again in November 1886 a son was born to them. Stray writings for the papers,

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and an occasional signed contribution to the reviews could not produce the income which was necessary to supplement the wife's allowance, and in the end Oscar Wilde turned to journalism for a living for himself and his family.

CHAPTER XII

Oscar Wilde in Fleet Street—Editor of *The Woman's World*—Pegasus in the Plough—His Loyalty to his Employers—The Industrious Apprentice—Lady Wilde and Constance Wilde as Contributors—A Severe Editor—A Kindly Critic—His List of Contributors—His Later Attacks on Journalists—The Possible Explanation of this Attitude—His Consistency in the Matter—Oscar Wilde and *M'Clure's Magazine*—Oscar Wilde and *Le Journal*—His Contributions to *The Daily Chronicle*—The Disinterestedness of this Work.

IT was at this time in his career that he came to be seen, periodically, in that Fleet Street of which, afterwards, he was to speak with such acerbity and contempt.

A firm of publishers of Ludgate Hill—the Messrs Cassell & Co.—had come to the conclusion that his reputation as a leader of fashion and an arbiter of the elegancies might be turned to profitable account on behalf of a certain monthly publication, issued from their printing-presses, which at that time enjoyed no high degree of public favour. The belief was held in La Belle Sauvage Yard that the name of Oscar Wilde printed in large letters upon the cover of this magazine—to be styled afresh: *The Woman's*

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World—would attract the attention and the custom also of the fashionable women to whom it was supposed to appeal, bringing in the train of their patronage that multitude of purchasers, who ensure commercial success. In this belief these printers proposed to him the direction of *The Woman's World*: the terms offered were what in his straitened circumstances, with the fresh charges upon him, he could not with prudence refuse, and the bargain was struck. If, after a prolonged test, the adventure did not result in satisfaction, it was not because the new editor failed in vigilance or assiduity, but because London society, in the sense of fashionable people, had not yet come under the sway of his influence. His connection with *The Woman's World* lasted from October 1887 to September 1889.

The amusing spectacle was thus afforded during this period, of a scholar, a critic, an artist acting as overseer and salesman of such productions of the pen as treat of the chatter of the shops, the commonplaces of tiring-room and pantry, the futilities of changing modes. "Are Servants a Failure?" "Fancy Dresses for Children," "Typewriting and Shorthand for Women," are the titles of some of the papers for which the future author of "The Soul of Man

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Under Socialism " and of " De Profundis " had to arrange, of which when written to approve, and which he had to send out to the world under his imprimatur. The history of the forlorn makeshifts and expedients to which necessity often constrains the most gifted men of letters affords no example more apposite than this part of Oscar Wilde's life. It reminds one of the experiences of Charles Baudelaire, the poet, when a committee of French provincial shareholders had brought him away from Paris, from the writing of the *Fleurs du Mal* and the translating of Edgar Allan Poe, to edit a local paper. If Charles Baudelaire, however, failed from the very outset, because he despised his work and approached his task in that spirit, it must be said of the Irish poet-editor that he very earnestly did his best for his employers. An apprentice to journalism, he displayed all those qualities of industry, punctuality, and ardour which, as Hogarth would have us believe, lead men to high honours and great wealth in the city of London. It was in the irony of things that a career thus entered upon should have led him, if not to Tyburn, at least to the Old Bailey and the Bankruptcy Court.

Baudelaire's first inquiry on entering the office of the provincial newspaper which he was

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to publish, was as to where the "editorial brandy-bottle" was kept. Wilde, was, perhaps, even more a slave to the nicotine habit, than Baudelaire, to alcohol, yet he very cheerfully accommodated himself to the strict rule imposed by Messrs Cassell & Co., that no smoking is allowed, under any pretext, in any part of their buildings. He seemed to take real pleasure in the hours which he spent in La Belle Sauvage Yard, because of the opportunities which were there afforded him of meeting Wemyss Reid, the editor of *The Speaker*, a man of great scholarship and refinement, for whom he had a great admiration. He used to take the underground railway from Sloane Square to Charing Cross, and thence walk up the Strand and Fleet Street to his office. The days had not yet come when he could declare that "he never walked." He was always dressed with elegance and care, presenting in his appearance a strong contrast to the types which are sometimes to be seen in that part of London. His regularity was at that time remarked upon. He was, no doubt, making a strong effort to subject himself to discipline. At the same time, no doubt, the interest and dignity of his position appealed to his histrionic nature. He walked, an editor, amongst the proletarians of the press. He had the satis-

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faction of showing that the part of journalist could be dressed by the tailors of Bond Street, the hatters and glovers of Piccadilly, and adorned by the florists of the Burlington Arcade—at a time, too, when he was, perhaps, one of the very poorest editors in London.

It appeared to his friends, at times, that he enjoyed the dignity, as well the meagre patronage of his editorial office. He was once heard to say, with some pride in his tones, speaking of his power of remunerating contributors: "I pay a guinea a page, no matter if most of the space is occupied by illustrations or not." That he had the interests of his employer at heart was shown by the fact that he never allowed feelings of friendship to interfere with the impartial performance of his duty as an editor. He was frequently applied to for commissions by needy Bohemian acquaintances, but where he considered that a man was not fitted to write for his periodical, he told him so. Lady Wilde and his wife contributed one or two articles each to *The Woman's World* during Oscar Wilde's editorship, but in every case the article on its own merits was well worthy of acceptance, and would have earned the fee paid from any editor in London. In the volume for 1889 we find from Lady Wilde's pen a collection of "Irish Peasant

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Tales." There are five of these tales, "A Night with the Fairies," "A Legend of Shark," "Fairy Help," "The Western Isles," and "St Patrick and the Witch."

Constance Wilde's contribution during this year to the magazine of which her husband was editor, is an illustrated, well "documented" paper on "Muffs," a good specimen of the "Museum-made" article.

It may be said that since the magistrate, Brillat-Savarin, wrote his "Physiologie du Goût," and showed that a cookery-book can be made a work of literary art, never has literary skill been put in stranger fashion at the service of the commonplaces of domestic life than appears in the pages of *The Woman's World* under Oscar Wilde's editorship. "Que diable allait-elle faire dans cette galère?" might be asked of literature. The magazine was too admirable to succeed. Its style was too refined for the people to whom the subjects treated of appealed, and those people who might have delighted in the style were kept aloof by the subjects.

Oscar Wilde's personal contributions to this periodical—apart from certain articles on special literary subjects—took the form of a monthly *causerie*, published under the title of "Some Literary Notes." Considerable care and in-

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dustry were expended by the editor on these articles. They usually occupied five pages of *The Woman's World*, and were quite the most interesting literary criticism then appearing in London. But what student of contemporary literature was going to hunt out these "literary notes" between an article on "The Gymnasium for Girls," by Mrs L. Ormiston Chant, and a paper on "Field-Work for Women," by Ouida.

Oscar Wilde's criticisms are always kindly, and full of instruction, which is just what criticism, if it is to have any value, should be. These pages are filled with *dicta* and epigram on the art of literature, which no future compiler of a complete edition of his works should fail to collect.

In the important matter of obtaining the services of distinguished people as contributors to his magazine, without possessing a free hand in fixing the scale of remuneration, Wilde was remarkably successful. During the first six months of 1899 he obtained for *The Woman's World* contributions from Oscar Browning, E. Nesbit, Annie Thomas, Ella Hepworth Dixon, Amy Levy, Ouida, Carmen Sylva, Blanche Roosevelt, the Countess of Portsmouth, St Heliers, Gleeson White, Miss Olive Schreiner, Lady Sandhurst, Miss F. L. Shaw, Miss Marie

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Corelli, Arthur Symons, and Mrs Crawford. Marie Corelli's contribution was a long article on Shakespeare's mother, which at the present rates in the literary *Rialto* could probably be disposed of by an efficient agent for twenty times the amount which the editor of *The Woman's World* was enabled to offer.

It should be added that Oscar Wilde was an editor whom it was not easy to please. He would tolerate no slovenliness of writing. In the matter, for instance, of punctuation he was scrupulous in the extreme. If anywhere on a printed or manuscript page laid before him a poor little comma had intruded where it had no right to be, or one had deserted its post, his flashing glance would immediately turn to the spot. One of his stories was that his hostess in a country house having asked him at dinner how he had spent the day he had answered: "I have been correcting the proofs of my poems. In the morning, after hard work, I took a comma out of one sentence." "And in the afternoon?" "In the afternoon, I put it back again." He was here jesting at what was a marked characteristic of his literary technique.

During all this time, apart from his editorship, he was a frequent contributor to the weekly and daily press, as well as to the

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magazines. He wrote anonymously for *The Pall Mall Gazette*, in whose columns he revealed himself as a brilliant paragraphist, who did not disdain the piquancy of personalities; he contributed much to *The World* under Yates's editorship; his name is to be found under many magazine articles which have long since been forgotten. One remembers, for instance, an article on "London Models" which appeared in *The English Illustrated Magazine* (vol. vi. 1888-1889), which is a good specimen of purely journalistic work.

It was not till a year or two later that he began to speak with such detestation of journalists. It is possible that it had taken him just so long to discover that the reputations which are made by newspapers have no real foundation in the hearts of the people, that interviews and paragraphs, and the whole gamut of periodical puffery, although they may make a person notorious, do not bestow upon him that popularity which is associated with the substantial benefices of fame. It is an experience which most public men have made; and those who have expected great results from the persistent clamour of the journalists, do often, when disappointed in these expectations, manifest rancour and resentment towards those whom at an

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earlier date they fostered. From a very early stage in his career Oscar Wilde had been one of the men in England whose names were most widely known—he himself once said that a year or two after he came to London his name was a household word throughout the country—but naturally as long as his reputation rested alone on this foundation he got nothing from it but such enjoyment as vanity might thence derive, and it is possible, what has been noticed in many other instances, that a peevish resentment arising from his disappointment prompted him to that contumely of journalists which unfortunately he continued to display long after real service to the public had brought true fame and its tangible rewards.

In the days of his own connection with the periodical press he sometimes used to speak in praise of certain of the characteristics of journalism. After the appointment of his brother William Wilde to the staff of *The Daily Telegraph* he was heard to say: "There is a great fascination in journalism. It is so quick, so swift. Willy goes to a Duchess's ball, he slips out before midnight, is away for an hour or two, returns, and as he is driving home in the morning, can buy the paper containing a full account of the party which he has just left." Like every-

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body else in England he expressed the greatest admiration for the work which his brother did in reporting the judicial proceedings of the Parnell commission. Yet in 1891, a bare year after he had turned his back on Fleet Street, he wrote that passage on British journalism which occurs in "The Soul of Man Under Socialism," which aroused against him the terrible hatred, suppressed at the time, which blazed forth at the time of his fall. One extract from this passage will suffice here. "In centuries before ours the public nailed the ears of journalists to the pump. That was quite hideous. In this century journalists have nailed their own ears to the keyhole. That is much worse." This vituperation of journalists was a constant feature of his conversation during the next few years. He frequently requested his brother not to dare speak to him of his "vile gutter friends from Fleet Street." He never missed an opportunity of insulting the press in his plays.

If there was ever any truth in the statement which has been frequently made that at one time in his life Oscar Wilde thirsted after newspaper notoriety with the eagerness of which certain contemporary writers afford so painful an example, it is a fact that when "The Ideal

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Husband " was being written he had entirely set his face against it. In January 1895 he was approached by the Messrs M'Clure, of *M'Clure's Magazine*, who were anxious to publish about him an article in the form of an interview. It should be stated that this magazine was already at that time a great power in the United States, and that the foremost writers and celebrities in other walks of life in all parts of the world had been glad to avail themselves of a publicity so beneficial and far-reaching. The writing of this article was to be done by one of Wilde's oldest friends, whose name was widely known in America in connection with work of this kind. The request of the Messrs M'Clure was answered by Oscar Wilde in a letter which he wrote from Tite Street to this friend, in which he said that he did not like the tone of his editor's letter—that to speak of wishing for "Oscariana" was an impertinence—that he understood that it was usual that a fee should be paid to the person interviewed, and that he would in no way assist in the production of the article unless he first received a cheque for £20. As at that time such a sum was of no importance to him whatever, and as in any other way he would have been glad to assist his old friend in his work, this letter affords good proof that personal advertisement

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by newspaper publicity had become entirely distasteful to him.

He was consistent in this dislike until the end. It occurred to some of his friends who watched him during his second Trial at the Old Bailey that the way in which on the posters of the newspapers his name was placarded all over London afforded him some satisfaction, and a remark of his on the subject is on record;¹ but this may be explained by that natural and pathetic prompting that moves every poor mortal to endeavour to find in any great personal disaster some scrap of consolation.

In his greatest distress, at a time when he needed money most badly, after his ruin had been consummated, he refused the most substantial offers from the proprietors of newspapers, and not only from those who merely wished to trade in the notoriety of his name. After his release from prison, while he was living in Berneval, it was suggested to Fernaud Xau, the proprietor of *Le Journal*, one of the principal papers in Paris, that Oscar Wilde could write effective articles on various questions of

¹ "The town was placarded with his name; and one night, alluding to this, I said: 'Well, you have got your name before the public at last.' He laughed, and said: 'Nobody can pretend now not to have heard it.' 'Oscar Wilde. The Story of an Unhappy Friendship'."

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literature and art on which his authority was uncontested. Xau agreed to place his name on his list of contributors, which included many of the leading politicians and all the foremost literary celebrities of France. The terms he offered as remuneration were the same as those paid to the first writers. There was here no suggestion at all that Oscar Wilde's collaboration was desired because the scandal which attached to his name would appeal to the morbid-minded, and create a profitable sensation. It was a plain, business-like offer from a very shrewd business-man to a writer of eminent and recognised capacity. It was a proposal which most authors of high standing and European reputation would have taken as a compliment. Yet, although at that time Oscar Wilde was in sad difficulties through want of money, he declined the offer without one moment's consideration. This refusal was courteously worded ; it was with scathing contempt that he repelled any approaches from the traffickers in sensation. It is reported that when, just previous to his release from Reading Gaol, the Governor informed him that the correspondents of an American paper who had been waiting in Reading for some days past were prepared to pay him a very large fee for the privilege of

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being allowed to interview him on the subject of his prison experiences he expressed his surprise, that any one should venture to make such proposals to a gentleman.

Some time previous to this release he had been speaking to a person in the prison about his future prospects. He had said that poverty awaited him outside the prison-gates. His friend said that "by writing an article or two for the monthlies he would be able to earn an immediate supply of money." "Ah," said Oscar Wilde, "I remember when one editor of the *Nineteenth Century* used to come to my house and solicit an article, and now I suppose he wouldn't accept one were I to offer it for nothing."

This friend in relating this conversation adds: "I endeavoured to make as light of his troubles as possible, and assured him that all he required was pen, ink and paper. 'My friend,' he said—he repeated these words on several occasions—'You do not know the world as well as I do. Some people might read what I chose to write out of morbidness, but I don't want that, I wish to be read for Art's sake, not for my notoriety.'"

His only contributions to journalism, after he left prison, were the long letters which he wrote under the title of "The Case of Warder Martin," on "Some Cruelties of Prison Life," and the letter

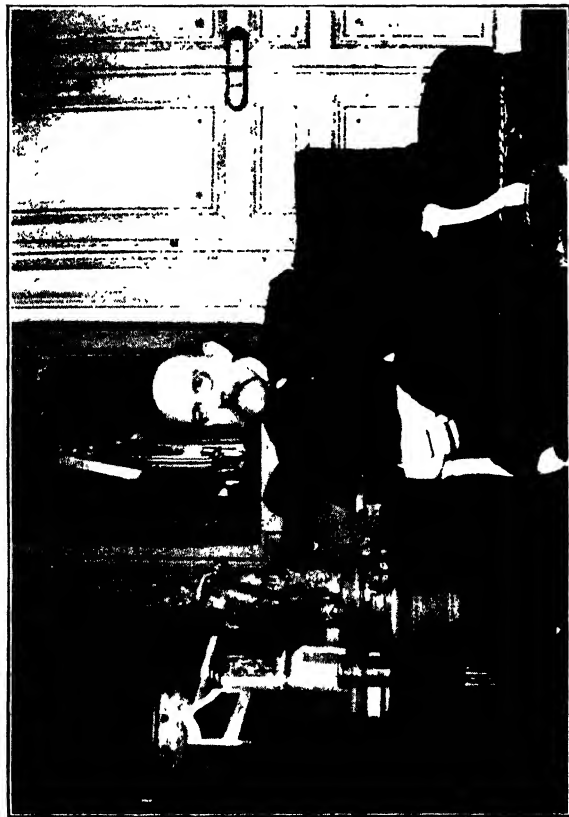
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"Don't Read This if you wish to be Happy To-Day." These appeared in *The Daily Chronicle* on Friday, 28th May 1897, and on 24th March 1898, respectively. Of these letters it need only be said of them that they were written from a pure spirit of philanthropy. No self-interest prompted its author to take pen in hand. It is a fact, which should be recorded here, that when he wrote the first letter he was extremely doubtful whether the editor would venture to publish it. It should be added in proof that gain was not his motive, that although a friend, the editor of one of the most important reviews in London, would, as he knew, have paid almost any fee for this contribution, he preferred to give it to the world through the agency of a daily paper, because he considered first that this exposure of abuses and cruelty should not be delayed one day longer than could be avoided, and secondly that the wider publicity of a newspaper with a great circulation would more effectively arouse public opinion. The amount of the fee paid to him, if any fee was paid, is not known, but it certainly did not exceed if indeed it reached the foison of the sums which out of a meagre purse, at a time of great need, he gave away to his poor comrades in misfortune, those who had been prisoners with him in Reading Gaol.

CHAPTER XIII

Some Traits of his Character—Oscar Wilde in Matters of Money—His Extreme Delicacy of Feeling—Oscar Wilde as a Talker—The Testimony of a Gentleman of Letters—And of a Man of Action—Oscar Wilde as a Man of Action—The Reasons of his Popularity—His Small Actual Production—His Immense Real Output—The Value of his Work—The Testimony of a Scholar—"The Picture of Dorian Gray"—How it was Written—The Refutation of a Charge—Wilde and Henley.

ALTHOUGH during the first years of his married life Oscar Wilde's difficulties were often very great, not on one single occasion in the whole of his life—even in the starveling years after his release from prison—did he obtain or attempt to obtain resources by any means unworthy of proper pride, of self-respect, of delicacy. He loved money for the pleasures that it commands; but he did not love it enough to let it soil his lordly hands. In this respect his pride reached to arrogance. In money matters he was the soul of honour—another point in his character which in a commercial country and amongst the Bohemians of art and letters would win little recognition. His generosity was unbounded. "I have no sense of property," he used to say;



HENRI DE RÉGNIER, AUTHOR OF A STRIKING MONOGRAPH ON OSCAR WILDE, FOR WHOM HE EXPRESSES GREAT ADMIRATION. MONSIEUR DE RÉGNIER IS A DISTINGUISHED POET AND

NOVELIST. HE MARRIED A DAUGHTER OF THE LATE ACADEMICIAN, JOSE DE HÉREDIA.

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but he did not add that for the property of others he had a respect as stern as to his own belongings he was totally indifferent. "Friends always share," he wrote to a man at Reading, who had been good to him. He was praying his acceptance of a sum of money, for the man had lost his employment. This man, just before Oscar Wilde's release, had begged him, knowing that the prisoner was penniless, and greatly concerned as to his position, to accept the loan of five pounds which he had saved up. With the most delightful badinage did C. 3.3. refuse the offer. He pretended that to a man of his extravagance such a sum would be useless. All this was so as to refuse without hurting the feelings of his friend a sum of money which to a working-man meant much. In the end he said that if things came to the worst and he did wake up one morning to find himself without a breakfast he would write for the five pounds and "buy a sandwich with it." The man said: "And a cigar." "I hardly think that it would run to that," said Oscar, "but if there is anything over I will buy a postage stamp and write to acknowledge the money." His generosity even was misconstrued. Gifts which had been made by him out of sheer kindness of heart were represented as bribes for nameless purposes.

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Towards his mother his liberality knew no limits. For years before his fall he maintained her in the affluence which she enjoyed.

During the eight years 1884-1891, although the total of his published work was not great, and judged by its quantity alone the man may be considered not to have greatly progressed, his development of those qualities and talents which were his especial distinction was as astounding as it was delightful. Those years were to the people who came into contact with him memorable as a succession of the rarest intellectual banquets. His spendthrift genius kept open house. He spoke, and those who heard him wondered why the whole world was not listening. There never can have been in the world's history a talker more delightful. A great lady said of him to Henri de Régnier that when Oscar Wilde was speaking it seemed to her that a luminous aureole surrounded his noble head. This remark is also repeated and confirmed by the testimony of Jean Joseph-Renaud.

Henri de Régnier, that *gentilhomme de lettres* in the republic of literature, the elegant and delicate writer of the daintiest prose in the French language, the poet of distinction, the novelist of refinement, pays in his book of essays

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Figures et Caractères a tribute to Oscar Wilde which (for nobility always *does* compel) he made public at a time when to write in praise of him was to court obloquy and foul suspicion. Writing of the impression which in those days Oscar Wilde produced in Paris he says :—

“ He pleased, he amused, he astounded. People grew enthusiastic about him ; people were fanatics where he was concerned.” It should be noted that Henri de Régner speaks here of the highest Parisian society, the *milieu* in which he himself, an elegant man of the world, moves. He describes the dinner at which the lady referred to above made her memorable pronouncement. “ The dinner, elegant and prolonged, was held in a luxurious room, brilliantly lighted. Scented violets were banked up on the cloth. In the cut-crystal glasses champagne sparkled ; fruits were being peeled with knives of gold. M. Wilde was speaking. There had been invited to meet him certain guests who were not talkative, and who were disposed to listen to him with pleasure. Of this conversation and of others I have kept a vivacious and lasting remembrance. M. Wilde spoke in French with an eloquence and a tact which were far from common. His expressions were embellished

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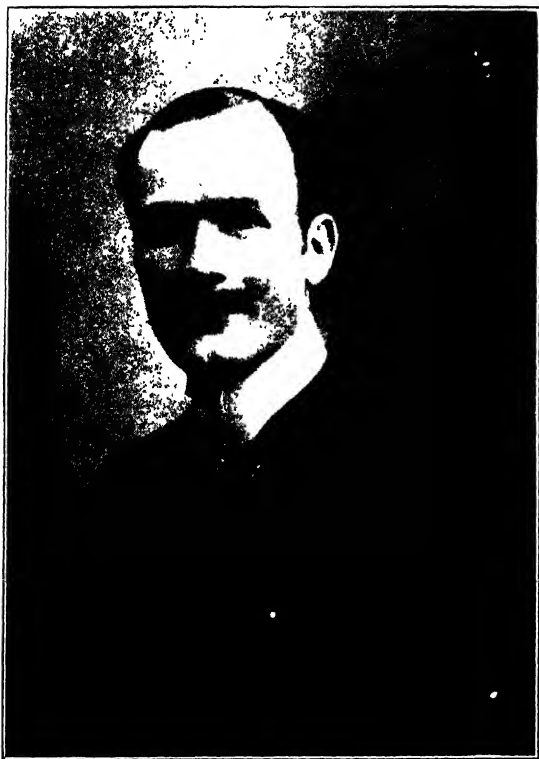
with words which had been most judiciously selected. As a scholar of Oxford, M. Wilde could as easily have employed Latin or Greek. He loved the Greek and Roman antiquities. His *causerie* was all purely imaginative. He was an incomparable teller of tales ; he knew thousands of stories which linked themselves one to the other in an endless chain."

Henri de Régnier here remarks what anyone who with due attention reads Oscar Wilde's fairy stories will observe :—

" This " (by telling stories) " was his way of saying everything, of expressing his opinion on every subject : it was the figurative hypocrisy of this thought " (the way in which he veiled his thoughts) . . .

" One might not press M. Wilde too closely for the meaning of his allegories. One had to enjoy their grace and the unexpected turns he gave to his narratives, without seeking to raise the veil of this phantasmagoria of the mind which made of his conversation a kind of ' Thousand and One Nights ' as spoken.

" The gold-tipped cigarette went out and lighted itself again incessantly in the lips of the story-teller. As his hand moved with a slow gesture the *scarabæus* of his ring threw off its green lights. The face kept changing its ex-



JEAN JOSEPH-RENAUD, TRANSLATOR OF "INTENTIONS," AND AUTHOR
OF A MOST INTERESTING MONOGRAPH ON OSCAR WILDE. MONSIEUR
RENAUD IS THE BEST GENTLEMAN FENCER IN FRANCE.

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pression with the most amusing mimicry, the voice flowed on unceasingly, dragging a little, always equal.

“ M. Wilde was persuasive and astonishing. He excelled in giving a certificate of truth to what was improbable. The most doubtful statement when uttered by him assumed for the moment the aspect of indisputable truth. Of fable he made a thing which had happened actually, from a thing which had actually happened he drew out a fable. He listened to the *Schéhérazade* that was prompting him from within, and seemed himself first of all to be amazed at his strange and fabulous inventions. This particular gift made of M. Wilde’s conversation something very distinct amongst contemporary *causeries*. It did not, for instance, resemble the profound and precise ingenuity of M. Stéphane Mallarmé, which explained facts and things in a manner so delicate and exact. It had nothing of the varied, anecdotic talk of M. Alphonse Daudet with his striking *aperçus* on men and things. Nor did it resemble in any way the paradoxical beauty of the sayings of M. Paul Adam, or the biting acridity of M. Henri Becque. M. Wilde used to tell his stories like Villiers de l’Isle-Adam told them. . . . M. Wilde charmed and amused, and he gave one the

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impression that he was a happy man—at ease in life.”

This is the impression of Oscar Wilde as recorded by a man of letters who is also a man of the world, member of the best and most refined society in Paris. We are able to give in contrast another picture of Wilde in Paris, as a *causeur*, by another man of letters of high distinction, Monsieur Jean Joseph-Renaud, whose testimony should be of special value in England. Jean Joseph-Renaud is one of the finest athletes in France. There is nothing morbid, nor decadent, nor pessimistic about him. He can box, both in the English and the French styles; he is a sportsman in every sense of the word, and he has the distinction of being the best gentleman fencer in France. He is well known amongst English swordsmen, and has given them cause to remember him. Those who witnessed his performances at the tournament at the Crystal Palace a year or two ago will be able to confirm the statement that there is nothing morbid, nor effete, about Jean Joseph-Renaud, and that what he says about Wilde is sincere, and from the heart. The following true account of his first meeting with Oscar Wilde, and of the effect which he produced upon the company in that house in Paris has been described by a

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great English novelist, who is at the same time our sternest literary critic, as masterly in its truthful representation of the man described. It shows us Wilde wishing at any cost to "amaze," and having failed in his first manner readily adopting another mode in which he triumphed, carrying all before him. The passage is from the preface to Monsieur Jean Joseph-Renaud's excellent translation of "Intentions." Renaud was a mere lad when he first met Wilde at the house of some of Mrs Wilde's relations in Paris. This is what he writes :—

"When, an hour late, Mr Wilde entered the drawing-room, we saw a tall gentleman, who was too stout, who was clean-shaven, and who differed from any *Auteuil* bookmaker, by clothes in better taste than a bookmaker wears, by a voice which was exquisitely musical, and by the pure blue light, almost like that of a child's eyes, which shone in his look. In his bulky cravat of greenish silk an amethyst sparkled with a subdued light ; his grey gloves, which were so fine as to be almost transparent, moulded his graceful hands ; an orchid was shrivelling itself up in his button-hole. Without listening to the names of the people who were introduced to him he sat down, and with an air of exhaustion begged Madame Lloyd to order the

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shutters of the dining-room to be closed and candles to be lighted. He said that he could not possibly stand the light of day. . . .

“The table decorations had to be altered, because the mauve flowers would have brought him bad luck. Then, as soon as the *hors d'œuvres* had been served he took definite possession of the conversation. What a disappointment awaited us. He spoke ‘pretentiously,’ asked questions, and did not wait for the replies, or addressed himself to people with too great directness; ‘You have never seen a ghost? No! Oh! Now you, Madame, yes, you, Madame, your eyes seem to have contemplated ghosts. . . .’ Then he declared that one night in a bar each table was put in its place, and the floor was swept, not by waiters, but by ‘the angels of the close of the day.’ His British accent reminded us of Sarah Bernhardt. . . . He next began to tell us, speaking almost in whispers, as though he were telling us secrets, and using mysterious phrases, some poetical and simple tales . . . about a young fisherman who pretends every night as he returns from the sea to have seen syrens; one day he really does see a syren, but when he comes home he does not say so . . . about a sculptor who with the bronze of a statue of ‘Pain Which Lives for Ever’ moulds

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the statue of 'Pleasure which Lasts but for one Moment.' Next he returned to what was *macabre*, and described at length the sensations which a visit to the Morgue in the different capitals of the world procures to a man. We found in M. Wilde the hoaxing cynicism of Baudelaire and Villiers de l'Isle-Adam as it appeared through an English medium. Already that fashion of amazing people seemed much out of date, and to this audience of intelligent *bourgeois* it was successful only in the bad sense of the word. The poet noticed this. He kept silent during the rest of the meal. But later on in the drawing-room, while coffee was being served, the conversation having turned on the success of a French comedy in England and Germany, he gently suggested that our prodigious theatrical instinct explains many of our acts ; French foreign politics, for instance, are theatrical ; they aim rather at the finest attitude, the most striking phrases, the most effective gestures, than at any practical successes. He then examined our history at length, from Charles X. up to modern times, from a paradoxical point of view. His conversation transformed itself, he displayed extraordinary knowledge and wit. Men, deeds, treaties, wars passed under review with appreciations, unsuspected, amusing,

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exact. He made them glitter under the light of his words, even as a jeweller awakes new lights in his gems.

“He then went on to talk about Lady Blessington and Disraeli.

“To tell us of the pains of love of Lady Blessington he little by little raised himself to a lofty and intoxicating lyricism ; his fine voice hymned, grew tender, rang out, like a viol, in the midst, of the emotional silence. This Englishman, who just before had appeared grotesque, reached, reached with simplicity, ay, surpassed, the expressive power of the most admirable odes of humanity. Many of us were moved to tears. One had never thought that the words of man could attain to such splendour. And this took place in a drawing-room, and the man who was speaking never spoke otherwise than as a man speaks in a drawing-room. We could understand that a great lady had said of him : ‘ When he is speaking I see round his head a luminous aureole.’ ”

Many Parisians who heard him in those days found apt the comparison which an English friend of his writing in the *Gaulois* had traced between his sayings and the largesse of his wit and the jewels of Buckingham at the Court of France. “ Ses mots,” so ran the phrase, “ se

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répandaient autour de lui comme autour de Buckingham, à la cour de France, se répandaient les bijoux par calcul mal attachés au pourpoint scintillant.” .

Padraic Colum, the young Irish poet, to whom his admirers look for such great things, describes in one of his poems in a very striking way how treasures for the future are laid up in the minds of men by the words of a teacher.

“But what avail my teaching slight ?
Years hence in rustic speech, a phrase
As in wild earth a Grecian vase.”

To Oscar Wilde, the talker, posterity will owe a great debt.

His voice was inimitable, though in itself an imitation. He had robbed Sarah Bernhardt of her golden voice, but he put the larceny to such a use that the crime became an act of social virtue. The most wonderful things said in the golden voice of the most wonderful woman : that was the conversation of Oscar Wilde. To have heard him speak has made the fortune of innumerable little men. There are *homunculi* triumphing in the drawing-rooms of the two hemispheres, who only faintly echo his manner. The smallest small change from his royal storehouse has made hundreds appear rich. Out of the tatters of his imperial mantle, which dis-

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aster dragged in the mire, many writers, many speakers, have cut for themselves resplendent robes in which they strut their small parades and enjoy their tiny triumphs. One constantly sees in modern literature books which bear upon the face of them the proof that the author's whole equipment was that he "remembers to have heard Oscar Wilde speaking." One of the most successful books which has appeared in France during the last fifteen years, a work which is hailed as an artistic masterpiece, and which at the same time is a huge commercial success, is just Wilde talking. "*Il passa sa vie à se parler,*" and the irony of the gods sentenced him to the silence of the tomb in the two most fruitful years of his life, when his genius had reached its apogee!

It was in his wonderful conversation that he found an issue for the bubbling energy of his brain, for his supreme activity. For we have always to remember that Oscar Wilde was a man of action, condemned by the social order of things to inactivity. It is, probably, because Jean Joseph-Renaud, himself a man of action, recognises this energy in Oscar Wilde also that he has espoused his cause and his defence with ardour so zealous. To the man of action absolute inactivity is physically impossible, and

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as he must be doing he will perform antics rather than do nothing. Many of the apparent buffooneries which in his youth were reproached against Oscar Wilde were the result merely of a chafing exuberance. He sought, indeed, saner outlets, and his misfortune was that circumstances ever barred the way. It is a fact that at one time not long after his marriage he was seriously considering the question of presenting himself as a candidate for Parliament. It is deeply to be regretted that his poverty prevented the realisation of this project. In a political career there was no height to which he could not have aspired. He had every one of the gifts that would have made of him in diplomacy an ornament and a treasure to the State. He would have filled the House of Commons with delight. He was a born orator. This he attributed himself to his nationality. Speaking of the Irish, he once said, referring to himself, in that self-accusing way which was one of the pathetic traits of his character: "We are too poetical to be poets. We are a nation of brilliant failures, but we are the greatest talkers since the Greeks." He had all the compelling power of great orators. He could move his audience by the sheer beauty of his tones. We have heard Renaud's testimony. Here is another

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instance : when he was lecturing in Dublin the audience was not at all sympathetic. His opening remark, "Let there be nothing in your houses which was not a joy to the man who made it," was received with ironical laughter. He immediately went off into a eulogy of Ireland, and gradually worked his hostile audience into sympathy which reached the culminating point of enthusiasm when he declared in accents which filled many eyes with tears : "When the heart of a nation is broken, it is broken in music." It was by his manner of speaking to women and children that he won such undying admirations from them. A charming scene is related by an Irish poet who was lunching once at Oakley Street with Oscar Wilde. Amongst the guests was a pretty girl, who was barely seventeen years old, and who had come up to town for her first season. When Oscar came in the girl exclaimed : "Oh ! Mr Wilde, where are your curls ?"

"Oh !" said Oscar, "I never wear them after the season is over."

"But, Mr Wilde, your curls are real ones !"

"Oh ! No ! I keep them in a bandbox at home. I will put them on and wear them for you the next time you come."

It was all so prettily said, with such kindness

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and humanity that that girl, remembering the encounter, and having come to know how other men would have spoken, could not help but think of the poor gentleman with grateful tenderness.

At a dinner given by Mr Frank Harris in honour of the Princess of Monaco, one of our most distinguished novelists, who had been estranged from Oscar Wilde during ten years, was introduced to him afresh. "That night," he relates, "Oscar Wilde's conversation was of the most extraordinary brilliancy. He subjugated us all. For my part I found him most delightful, and thought with regret of all the pleasure which I had missed during the ten years in which we had avoided each other." On the morning after that dinner, the Princess sent her portrait to Oscar Wilde, and on it she had written the words:

"Au vrai Art, A Oscar Wilde."

In prison he seems to have preserved his power of repartee. There are things on record which were there spoken in the watchful whispers of those who are dumb by law and under penalty, and which scintillate with wit. When freedom released his tongue his friends found that he had never been more brilliant. Ernest La Jeunesse in an article which reaches that high point of

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literary excellence that it may be said of it that it is a tribute to the great man about whom it was written, gives a striking picture of this dying eloquence.

“He is haunted with a foreboding of death, which in the end will kill him. He then tells all his stories in one breath: it is the bitter yet dazzling final piece of a display of superhuman fireworks. Those, who, at the end of his life, heard him unravel the skein of gold and jewelled threads, the strong subtleties, the psychic and fantastic inventions with which he proposed to sew and embroider the tapestry of the plays and poems which he was going to write, those who saw him proud and indifferent, affronting extinction and coughing or laughing out his ultimate phrasings, will keep the remembrance of a sight at once tragic and lofty, the sight of a man damned yet impassive, who refuses to perish altogether.”

Another picture of Oscar Wilde as a talker, at this time in his life when the voice was so soon to be hushed, is given by one who had known him for years, and who saw him in those last days. It was not a friend.

“Of course, he had his bad moments, moments of depression and sense of loss and defeat, but they were not of long duration. It was part of

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his pose to luxuriate a little in the details of his tragic circumstances. He harrowed the feelings of many of those whom he came across ; words of woe poured from his lips ; he painted an image of himself, destitute, abandoned, starving even (I have heard him use the word after a very good dinner at Paillard's) ; as he proceeded he was caught by the pathos of his own words, his beautiful voice trembled with emotion, his eyes swam with tears ; and then suddenly, by a swift, indescribably brilliant, whimsical touch, a swallow-wing flash on the waters of eloquence, the tone changed and rippled with laughter, bringing with it his audience, relieved, delighted, and bubbling into uncontrollable merriment. He never lost his marvellous gift of talking ; after he came out of prison he talked better than before. Everyone who knew him really before and after his imprisonment is agreed about that.”¹

He had the delightful way of speaking to the poor, to inferiors as society calls them, which distinguishes gentlemen. Amongst this class he enjoyed great popularity. He is still remembered by them. In a recent letter a gentleman writes : “ By a queer coincidence my cook was once in his service. She has nothing but good

¹ From an article signed “ A ” in *The St James's Gazette*

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to say of him and of 'his sweet face.' " One could adduce hundreds of similar testimonies. In Reading Gaol he was the most popular prisoner, not only with the prisoners but with the warders. At Berneval Monsieur "Sebastian Melmoth" was the *coqueluche* of the village. The peasants adored him; the village children loved him; and the coast-guardsmen were Melmoth's men to a man. He had eminently that quality of ingratiating himself with the humble, without sacrificing a tittle of his dignity, to which the Germans give the name of "leutselig." There is no English equivalent for this word; "affable" does not render it. The French spoke of him as *un homme doux*. He was a kind-hearted gentleman, nothing more.

It is possible that a pathologist would have seen in the extraordinary brilliancy of Oscar Wilde's talk, in its unceasing flow and the apparently inexhaustible resources of wit and knowledge on which he drew, the prodromes of the disease of which he died. The cause of his death was meningitis, which is an inflammation of the brain, and it is possible that for many years before this disease killed him it may have existed in a subacute and chronic state which might account for the almost feverish energy of his cerebration. But to the ordinary man

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no saner, no serener, speaker ever appeared. He seemed at all times master of himself; it was, indeed, this perfect *maestria* of his powers of conversation which so astounded those who approached him. When one comes to think of the matter why should not Oscar Wilde's friends be satisfied that his memory should go down to the after-ages as that of one of the most brilliant talkers who ever lived? There are men high in humanity's Walhalla who left little behind them but the echoes of their voice. The greatest philosophers, the men who gave new religions to the world, did not write; they talked. Did Christ write, did Mahound write, did Socrates write? If Oscar Wilde had had the fortune to find amongst his associates a disciple who would have taken the trouble to record his teachings—for he was always teaching—when he spoke, he would have been remembered in the world's history as one of the wisest of philosophers. He was the head of a new school of philosophy; his philosophy had in its tenets the real secret of human happiness, and what grander eulogy can there be for any school than that? He was an optimist who understood to the very extremest extent why mankind is prone to pessimism. He felt keener than most men the horrors of life, the cruelties of the world, the desperate sufferings

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that social injustice inflicts, and yet he had found a way to happiness out of all these evil things. Nobody could listen to him without being benefited. His talk was a cry of *Sursum Corda*. He taught you to know evil, and by deriding it to enjoy good. What reason was there that he should write at all ?

Yet he was always blaming himself for his indolence. He had acquired Carlyle's table for his study, and sometimes sitting at it, toying with his pen, he used to say : " I ought to be putting black upon white, black upon white." Those years may have appeared barren to himself, who was always self-accusing ; and those who measure genius by its output may point to his small production when they deny the genius of Oscar Wilde. Yet there are many who find that what he did write during that period of his life was sufficient to give him a very high place in English literature and amongst the philosophers of the world. These deny that he was in the right when he once said plaintively : " I have put my genius into my life ; into my books I have put my talents only." The effect that has been produced by his essay " The Soul of Man," which originally appeared in *The Fortnightly Review* in February 1891, has been described. It brings hope and comfort to

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thousands of the world's most cruelly disinherited. Who shall say what has been the wide-spreading and most beneficial influence of that marvellous book "Intentions"? Let one testimony be quoted. It is that of a man of the very highest scholarship and learning in England, whose bent has led him specially to study the religions and the philosophical systems of the world. "My experience may be interesting," he writes in a letter. "After taking a high degree in Classics at Cambridge, and then reading literature and science, for mere love of beauty and truth, I happened after about six years of this, to come across 'Intentions.' This first reading showed me something different from any other writer; I seemed to see the meaning of literature and art as I never had before; in fact he taught me the secret I had always missed. I said: 'Never man spoke like this man.' It was a revelation; more so than when I read Plato. I secured all his books I could. Every friend of mine with any culture or insight seems to have the same experience on reading him. This is really a remarkable fact, and when my first judgment of him, as the best of them all, was always inviting reconsideration in my own mind, as too remarkable to be true, I found others holding the same judgment. . . . I have

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always had what I don't like to call an infallible taste in art and literature—my friend . . . can say something as to that—but I mention this absurdly egoistic belief simply because at first I had at times a lurking suspicion that my taste must be wrong, because of my estimate of Wilde. But I have never found reason to alter it.” The name of the friend whom the writer quotes as his surety is, indeed, a patent of critical taste in literature, scholarship and art.

“Intentions,” “The Soul of Man,” his Fairy-stories “The Happy Prince,” and “The House of Pomegranates”: it was in these books that his philosophy was expounded. The only other work of importance which he published during this period—that is to say, from the date of his marriage until 1892, when he came to popularity, and its dangers—was his novel “The Picture of Dorian Gray.” This story was written to the order of the proprietors of *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine*, an American periodical which in 1890 was publishing a complete novel by some author of repute as a supplement to the other contents. Oscar Wilde was one of the men who were invited by the editor to contribute a complete tale. When to a literary artist is given an order to produce a work of a certain length in a certain time, the result is rarely, from the point of view

